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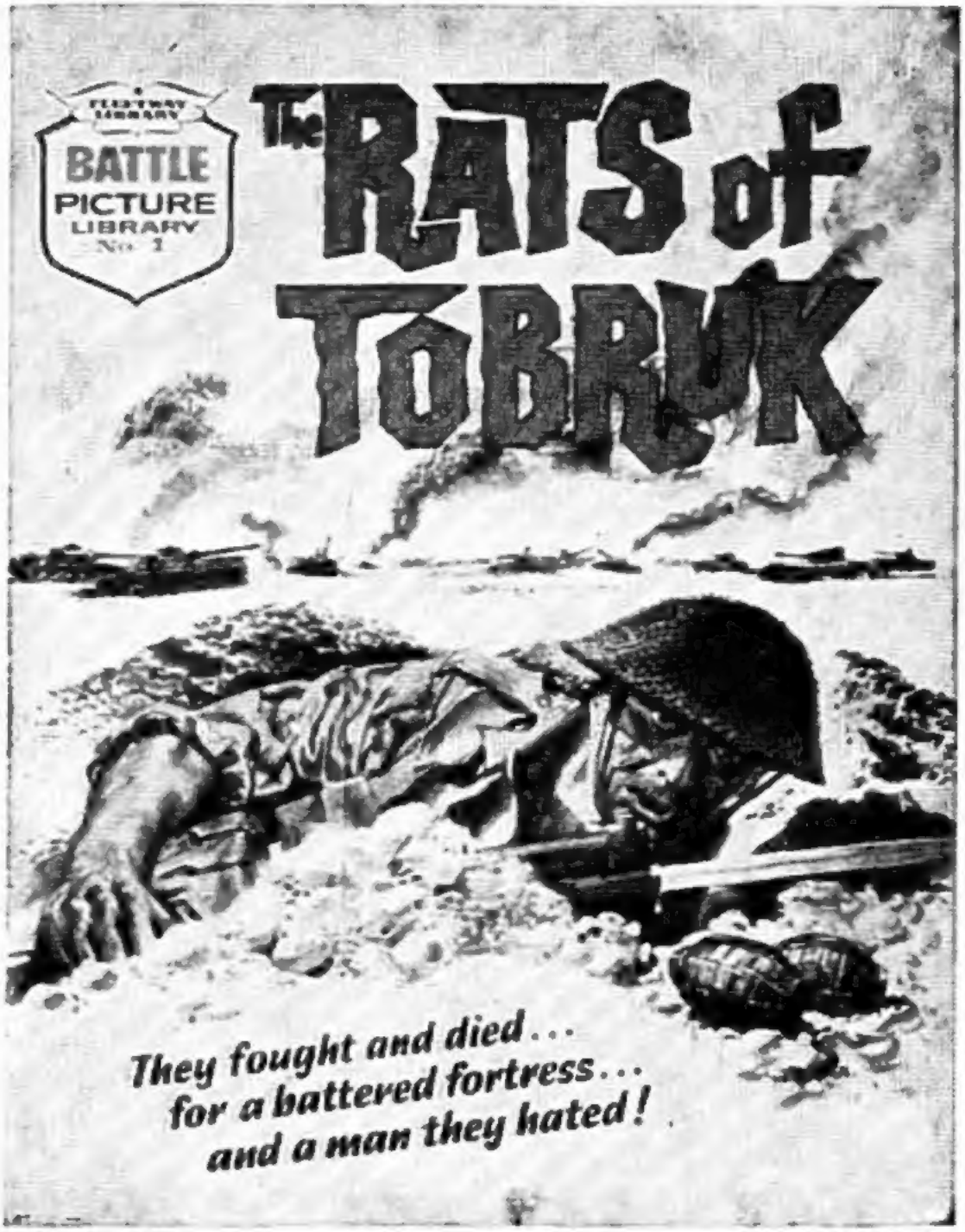

TWO Dramatic, All-action Issues Every Month

Hell's Mouth

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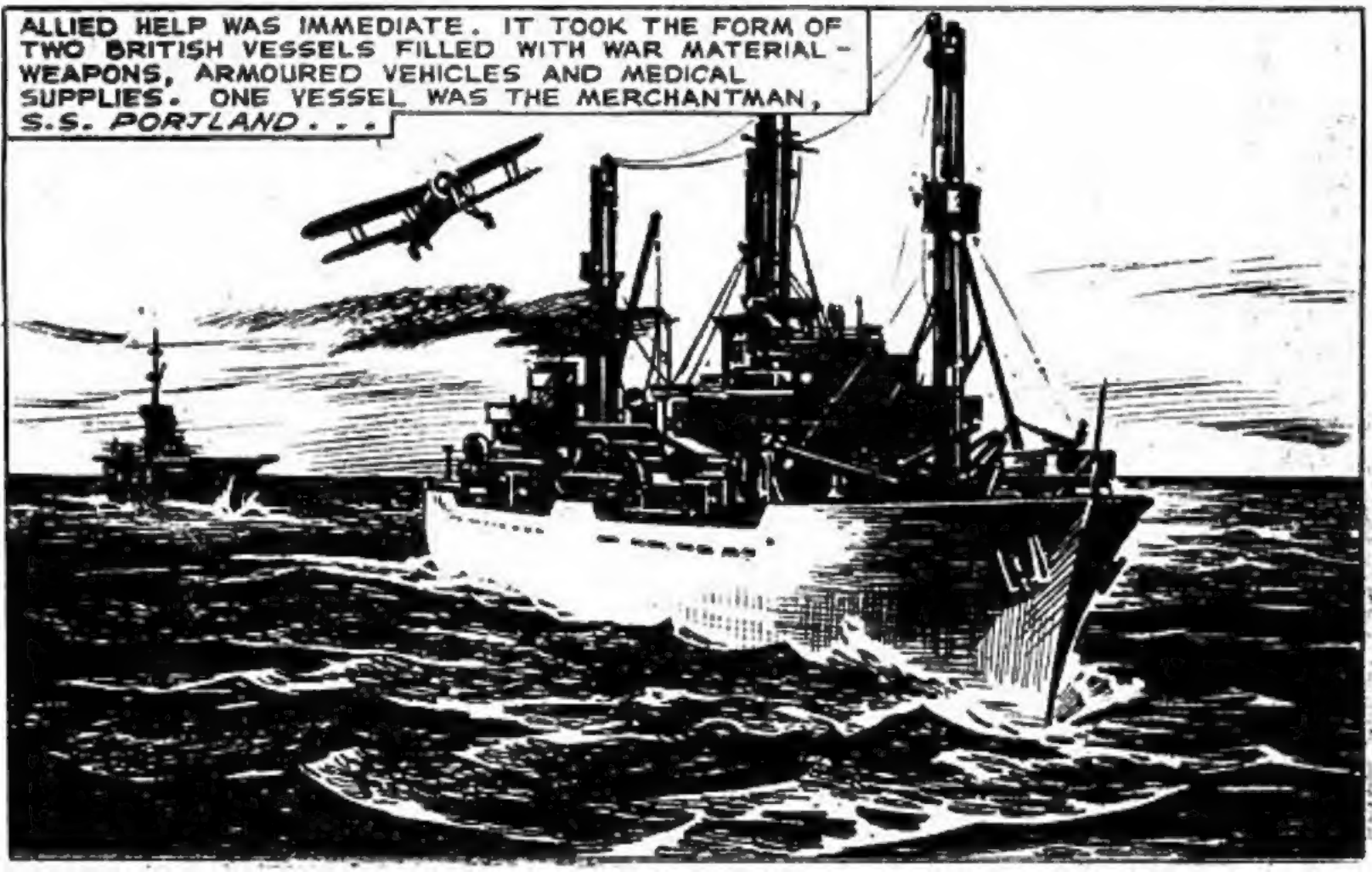
Chapter 1. ARMS FOR FREEDOM



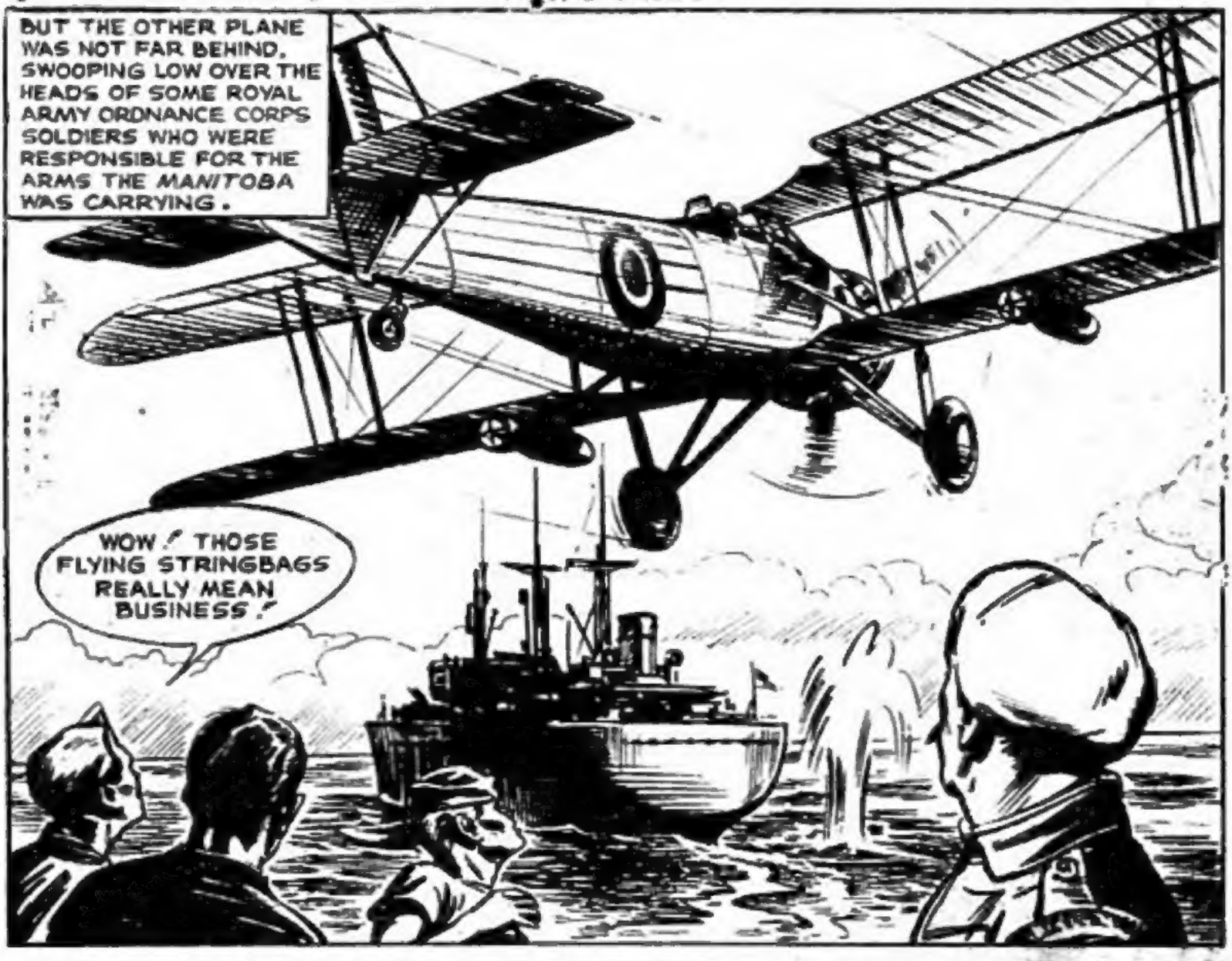
THE OTHER WAS A MORE UNUSUAL CRAFT. SHE WAS THE S.S. MANITOBA, AN OLD PEACE-TIME GRAIN SHIP CONVERTED INTO A MERCHANT AIRCRAFT CARRIER. AT HER MAST STILL PROUDLY WHIPPED THE RED ENSIGN OF THE MERCHANT NAVY. ON HER SMALL FLIGHT-DECK WERE TWO OF HER COMPLEMENT OF THREE SWORDFISH AIRCRAFT OF THE FLEET AIR ARM.
PORT TEN!
TEN OF PORT WHEEL ON, SIR.!
THE MASTER OF THE MANITOBA WAS CAPTAIN FRANK MARSH - A SEASONED SEAMAN IN THE YEARS OF PEACE AND A BATTLE-WEATHERED VETERAN OF A LONG BITTER WAR AT SEA.
TO THIS QUIET-SPOKEN MAN THERE NO
N FELL THE TASK
OF BRINGING THESE TWO VESSELS ACRO
S THE BAY OF
BISCAY, TO UNLOAD THEIR PRECIOUS CAR
GO AT A COASTAL
PORT STILL HELD BY THE FIGHTING FREN
CH. TO HIM IT
SEEMED A SIMPLE ENOUGH JOB BUT FA
E WAS TO
DECREE OTHERWISE.

PRESENTLY THE LEADER OF THE THREE NAVAL PILOTS CLIMBED TO THE BRIDGE. HE WAS LIEUTENANT "CHIPS" WOODLEY, R.N.V.R.
TOMORROW WE'LL BE THERE AND NOTHING'S HAPPENED. WHAT KIND OF WAR IS THIS ?
PRETTY TAME, I SUPPOSE, COMPARED WITH THE HOT SPOTS YOU RECKON YOU'RE MISSING ON THE INVASION COAST !

FRANK UNDERSTOOD THE YOUNG PILOT'S FEELINGS. TO BE SWITCHED FROM A TOP FLIGHT AIRCRAFT CARRIER TO AN OLD "CONVERSION JOB" MUST HAVE BEEN GALLING INDEED.
CHEER UP, CHIPS... WE MAY MEET SOME WAR YET !
NOT AGAIN IN THESE PARTS, SKIPPER ...OTHERWISE THE ADMIRALTY WOULD HAVE SENT OUT CREWS WITH US !
IT WAS A FACT THAT NO SWORDFISH OBSERVER/GUNNERS HAD BEEN SPARED FOR WHAT WAS CONSIDERED A FAIRLY SAFE RUN.

BUT EVEN AS CHIPS SPOKE, THERE WAS A DISTANT THUMP AND A COLUMN OF WATER ERUPTED FROM THE SEA CLOSE TO THE MERCHANTMAN STEAMING A THOUSAND YARDS AHEAD.
BY THUNDER ! SHELLING ! JERRY'S SHELLING THE PORTLAND !
FROM THE SHORE. HEAVY STUFF, TOO. SIGNAL HER TO ALTER COURSE, MISTER ANDREWS !
AYE, AYE, SIR !

TWO MORE SHELLS FOLLOWED THE *PORTLAND* AS SHE TURNED AWAY. THE SHOOTING WAS TOO ACCURATE TO SUIT FRANK MARSH . . .
YOU WANTED ACTION, CHIPS! TAKE THE OTHER AIRCRAFT AND PUT A SCARE INTO THOSE GUNS!
YES, SIR!
BOTH AIRCRAFT WERE ALREADY LOADED UP WITH THE LATEST ANTI-SUBMARINE BOMBS, HIGHLY OFFENSIVE MISSILES. CHIPS WOODLEY'S SWORDFISH WAS TAKING OFF BEFORE SUB-LIEUTENANT BILLY SANDERS HAD EVEN REACHED HIS COCKPIT.


BUT THE OTHER PLANE WAS NOT FAR BEHIND, SWOOPING LOW OVER THE HEADS OF SOME ROYAL ARMY ORDNANCE CORPS SOLDIERS WHO WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ARMS THE MANITOBA WAS CARRYING.
WOW! THOSE FLYING STRINGBAGS REALLY MEAN BUSINESS!

A VETERAN OF THE NORTH AFRICAN AND ITALIAN CAMPAIGNS, SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK HAD ACQUIRED A HEALTHY RESPECT FOR GERMAN GUNNERS.
THEY HAD BETTER LOOK SLIPPY OR JERRY WILL BLOW THIS CARGO OF IRONWARE OUT OF THE WATER!

ANOTHER GUN-FLASH WINKED FROM THE SHORE AND ANOTHER COLUMN OF WATER MUSHROOMED...THIS TIME RIGHT UNDER THE PORTLAND'S STERN.

THE IRRITABLE, SHORT-TEMPERED VOICE OF CAPTAIN MAGGS OF THE PORTLAND ECHOED ACROSS THE WATER...
AHOY, MANITOBA! CONFOUND IT, THAT LAST SHELL WRECKED MY STEERING! WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE TO DO ABOUT IT?

FUMING IMPATIENTLY FOR A REPLY, CAPTAIN MAGGS REFLECTED BITTERLY ON THE WHOLE SITUATION - SOMETHING WHICH HAD GNAWED AT HIS PRIDE SINCE THE DAY THEY SAILED . . .

IMAGINE IT! FIFTEEN YEARS MY JUNIOR MARSH IS AND HE'S PUT IN CHARGE OF THIS TRIP INSTEAD OF ME! IF ONLY THEY KNEW AS MUCH ABOUT THAT HOT-HEADED YOUNG FOOL AS I DO, THEY'D BE SORRY!

FRANK MARSH WAS IN NO DOUBT OF THE OTHER SKIPPER'S OPINION OF HIM...BUT HE GAVE IT NOT A THOUGHT AS HE ISSUED INSTRUCTIONS...

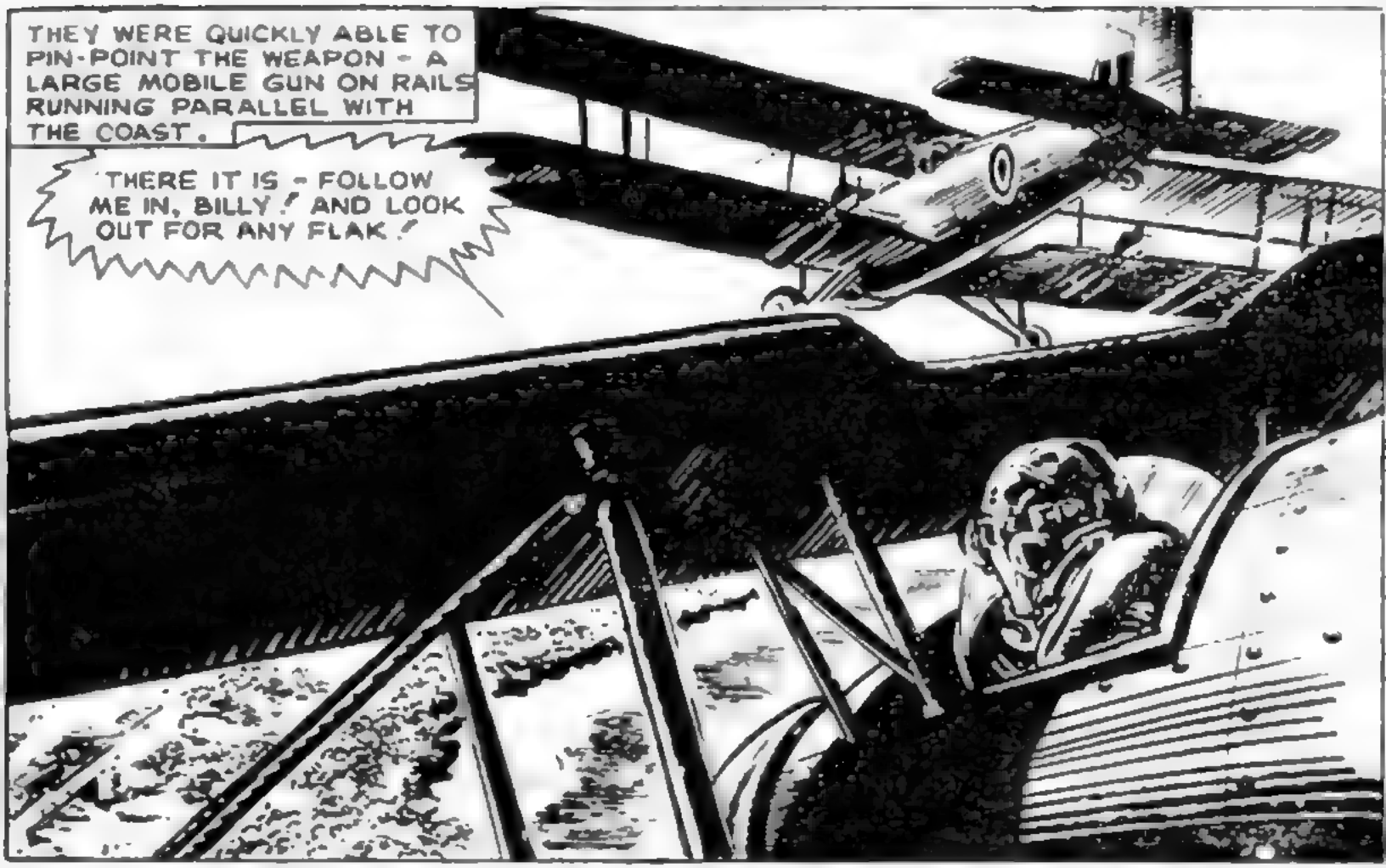
SHE'S DRIFTING, SIR!

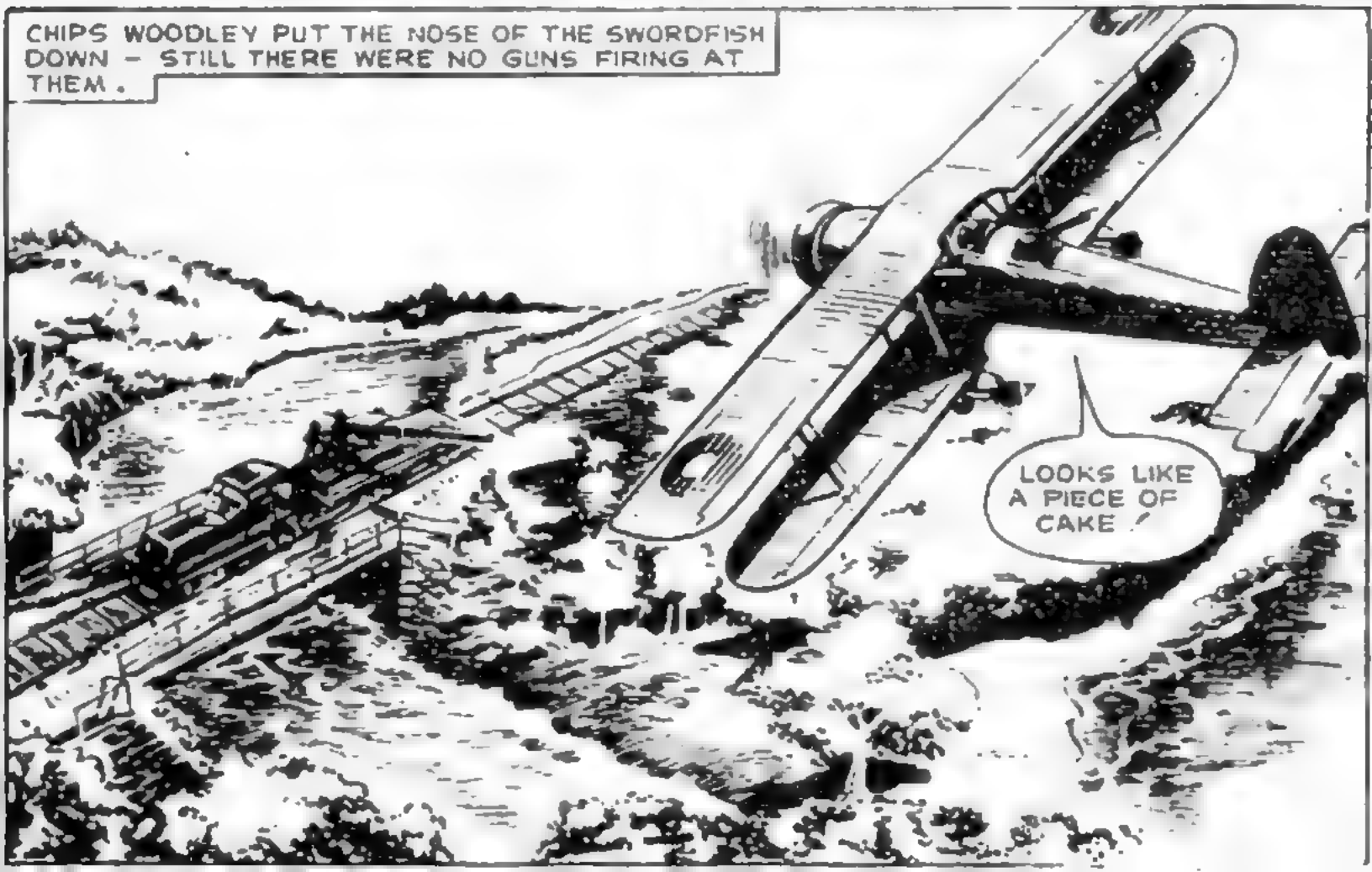
STAND BY WITH HEAVING LINES. WE'LL TOW HER OUT OF RANGE!

MEANWHILE CHIPS WOODLEY AND SUB-LIEUTENANT SANDERS WERE HEADING SHOREWARDS. BEHIND THEM, THEY HAD LEFT AN INDIGNANT BROTHER PILOT CIRCLING ABOVE THE SHIPS.

TOMMY'S BINDING LIKE MAD, CHIPS.

SOMEONE'S GOT TO KEEP WITH THE SHIPS. WATCH OUT FOR THOSE GUN FLASHES, BILLY!


THEY WERE QUICKLY ABLE TO PIN-POINT THE WEAPON - A LARGE MOBILE GUN ON RAILS RUNNING PARALLEL WITH THE COAST.
'THERE IT IS - FOLLOW ME IN, BILLY! AND LOOK OUT FOR ANY FLAK!


CHIPS WOODLEY PUT THE NOSE OF THE SWORDFISH DOWN - STILL THERE WERE NO GUNS FIRING AT THEM.
LOOKS LIKE A PIECE OF CAKE!

THEN SUDDENLY A MULTIPLE ANTI-AIRCRAFT CANNON OPENED UP AND SHELLS RIPPED SKYWARDS AT THE PLANES AS THEY DIVED AT FULL THROTTLE . . .
FASTER — FIRE FASTER ! YOU CAN'T MISS !

BUT THE LEADING SWORDFISH SWEPT THROUGH THAT TORNADO OF STEEL AS IF IT DID NOT EXIST.
NEXT SECOND . . .
AAAGH !

HARD ON HIS LEADER'S TAIL SWOOPED BILLY SANDERS.. HIS TWO BOMBS BLASTING CONFUSION INTO AN ABSOLUTE CHAOS.

THE GUN TRAILER WAS BLASTED FROM THE RAILS TO TOPPLE PONDEROUSLY INTO THE WATERS OF A CANAL. THE GUN WOULD NEVER FIRE AGAIN.

BUT THE DAMAGE HAD ALREADY BEEN DONE. WITH ONE SHIP CRIPPLED OFF THE HOSTILE COAST, THE SITUATION WAS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER.

THE *PORTLAND'S* IN TOW! SHE MUST HAVE COPPED A PACKET!

FRANK MARSH'S PATIENCE WAS ALREADY BEING SORELY TRIED BY THE CONSTANT INJUNCTIONS FROM THE CRITICAL MAGGS. HE SCARCELY HEARD THE GLAD CRY FROM HIS THIRD PILOT, SUB-LIEUTENANT TOM WELLS...
TOO FAST, MANITOBA!
HERE COMES CHIPS... AND BILLY!

MAGGS HAS NEVER FORGOTTEN OR FORGIVEN ME FOR THE TIME I DIDN'T TAKE HIS ADVICE!

THE MASTER OF THE MANITOBA TURNED TO GREET HIS TRIUMPHANT PILOTS.
IT WAS A SINGLE GUN... A WHOPPER ...ON RAILS!
WE PUSHED IT OVER!
WELL DONE, LADS! BUT NOT BEFORE IT WINGED THE PORTLAND, I'M AFRAID - LET'S GO AND HAVE A LOOK AT THE CHARTS!

IN THE COMBINED CHARTROOM AND WHEELHOUSE JUST BELOW THE BRIDGE . . .
THIS TOW HAS REDUCED US TO A CRAWL. CAN THE FRENCH HOLD OUT TILL WE GET THERE ?
HOW FAR TO GO NOW, SKIPPER ?
HERE'S OUR PRESENT POSITION...ABOUT ANOTHER HUNDRED MILES TO ARCACHON. JUST HOPE WE WON'T BE TOO LATE !
SUPPOSING WE ARE ?

AT THAT MOMENT A SIGNAL FROM ENGLAND WAS BROUGHT TO FRANK MARSH. GRIMLY, HE READ IT OUT...
'ARCACHON FALLEN TO THE ENEMY. NO ALTERNATIVE PORT FACILITIES. STAND TO AND AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.'

ANDREWS, THE FIRST OFFICER, TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE BAROMETER AND TURNED RUEFULLY TO HIS CAPTAIN.
THE GLASS IS DROPPING, SIR - WE'RE IN FOR ROUGH WEATHER!
WITH A SHIP IN TOW. THAT'S JUST DANDY! LOOK OUT A LARGER SCALE CHART, WILL YOU - THERE MUST BE ANOTHER PORT.

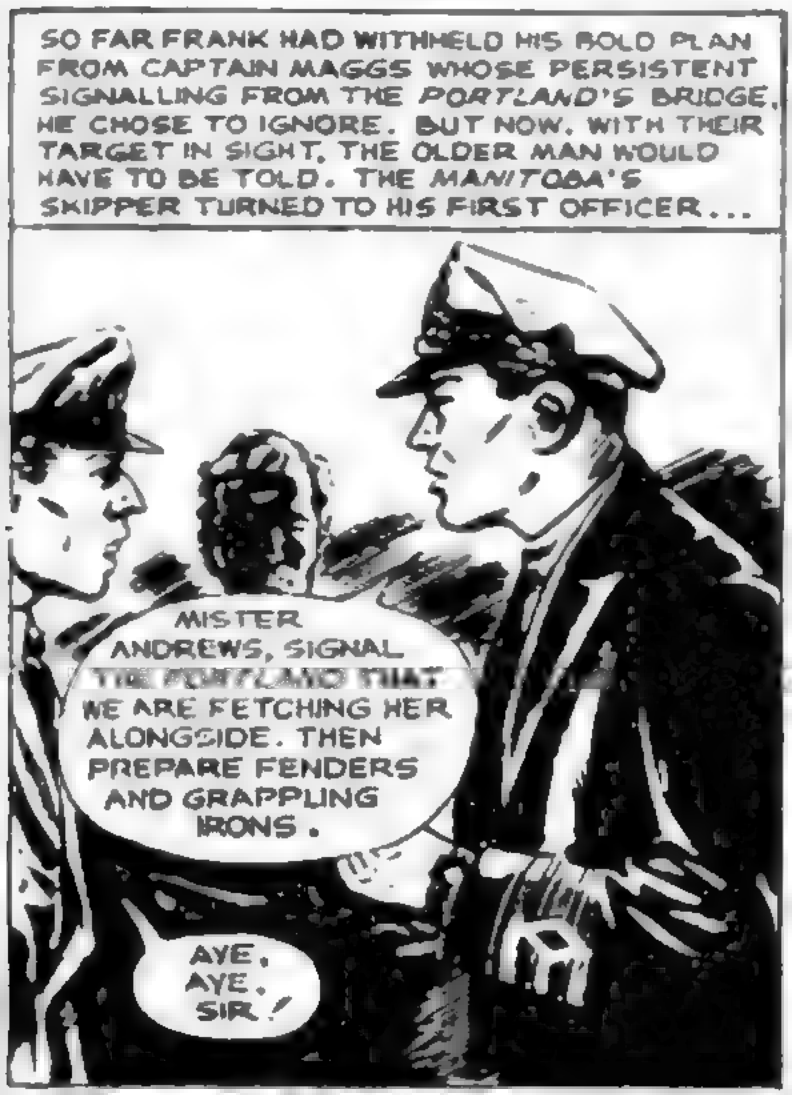
BUT THE DETAILED CHART GAVE THEM NO ALTERNATIVE HARBOUR FACILITIES — EXCEPT THOSE HELD BY THE ENEMY.
IF ARCACHON'S FALLEN, WHERE ELSE CAN YOU TRUST TO PUT IN, SIR?
THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN AN ALTERNATIVE PLAN IN CASE THIS HAPPENED BUT THERE ISN'T ANY OTHER WAY OF GETTING OUR CARGO TO BORDEAUX - UNLESS...

COOLLY, FRANK MARSH BEGAN TO FILL HIS PIPE . . .
...UNLESS WE SAIL UP THE GARRONE ESTUARY, STRAIGHT INTO BORDEAUX ITSELF.
GARRONE ESTUARY! BUT IT'S ALIVE WITH GERMANS!
WHAT'S THERE TO BE SCARED OF? ALL THE JERRIES WE'LL MEET WILL BE LINING THE BANKS BEGGING FOR SEA-BISCUITS. THEY'LL BE GLAD TO SEE US, WORSE LUCK!

FRANK TOOK SOME CHALK AND SKETCHED THE SIXTY MILES OF GARRONE ESTUARY LEADING TO BORDEAUX. HE HAD SAILED UP IT A FEW TIMES...BEFORE THE WAR.
THERE WOULD BE ONE THING IN OUR FAVOUR - THE GREAT BREADTH OF THE ESTUARY, AS MUCH AS SIX MILES IN PLACES. IN THE DARK WE MIGHT GET A GOOD WAY UP BEFORE WE WERE SPOTTED. WHAT DO YOU BOYS SAY?
IT'S EITHER THE DEVIL OR THE DEEP BLUE SEA... WITH GALE FORCE WINDS! I CHOOSE THE DEVIL!
ME, TOO!
BORDEAUX

Chapter 2. HOSTILE WATERS

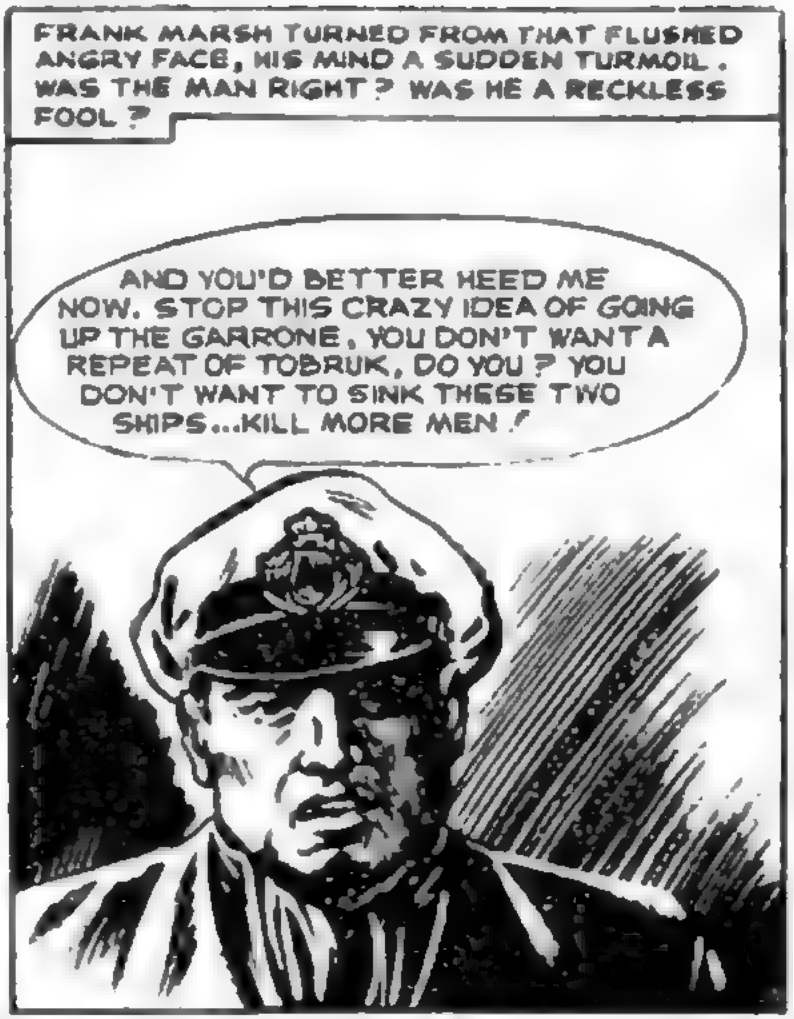
WITH THE BAREST MINIMUM OF LIGHT TO ASSIST HIM, TOM WELLS SCRAMBLED HIS SWORDFISH OFF THE MANITOBA . . .
HE'S GOING TO FIND IT TRICKY LANDING ON AGAIN, SKIPPER .
I'M AFRAID WE'VE GOT TO START TAKING CHANCES, CHIPS, IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THROUGH !

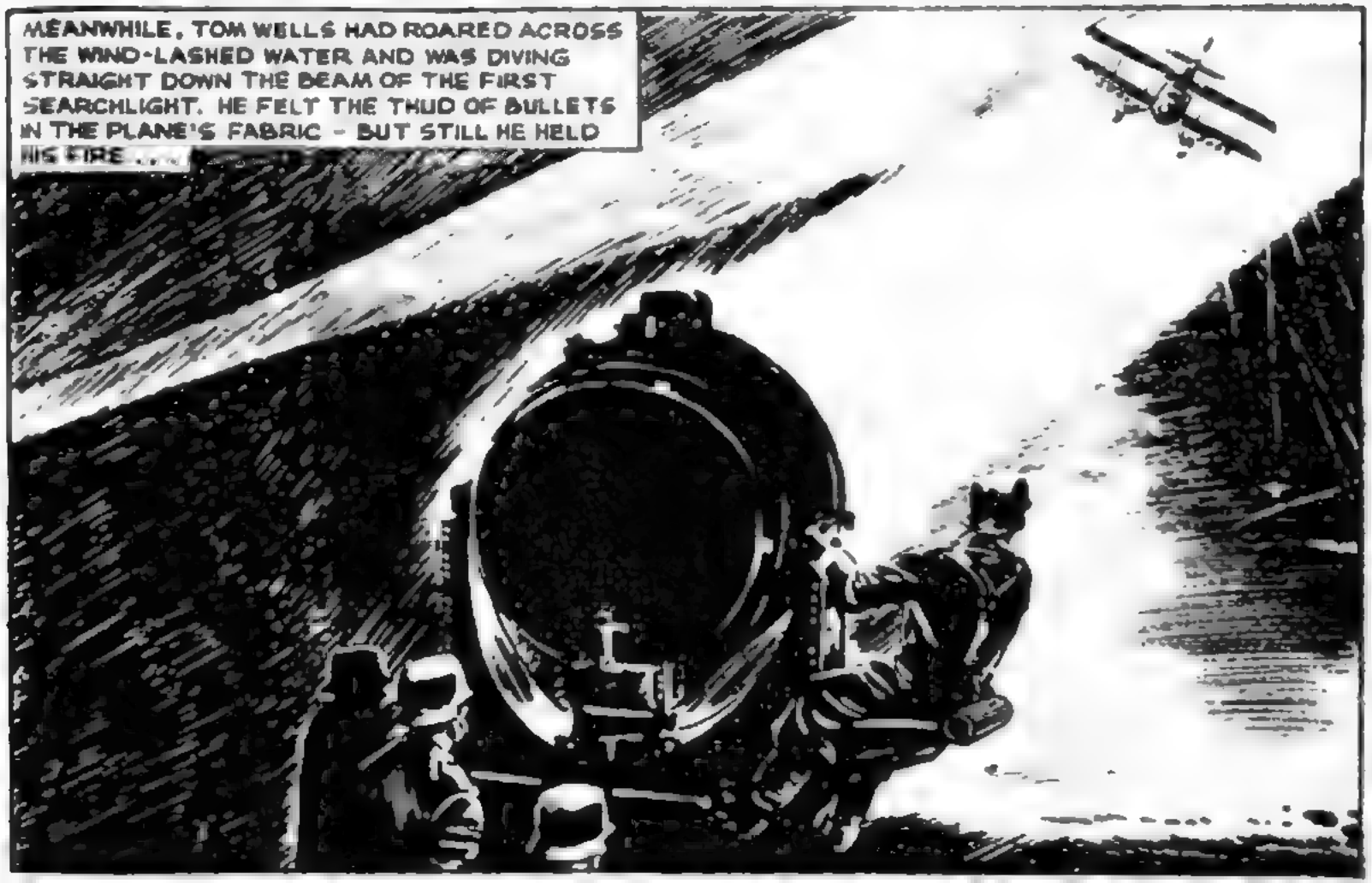

SO FAR FRANK HAD WITHHELD HIS BOLD PLAN FROM CAPTAIN MAGGS WHOSE PERSISTENT SIGNALLING FROM THE PORTLAND'S BRIDGE, HE CHOSE TO IGNORE. BUT NOW, WITH THEIR TARGET IN SIGHT, THE OLDER MAN WOULD HAVE TO BE TOLD. THE MANITOBA'S SKIPPER TURNED TO HIS FIRST OFFICER . . .
MISTER ANDREWS, SIGNAL THE PORTLAND THAT WE ARE FETCHING HER ALONGSIDE. THEN PREPARE FENDERS AND GRAPPLING IRONS .
AYE, AYE, SIR !

THE TWO SHIPS HAD HARDLY RASPED ALONGSIDE EACH OTHER WHEN CAPTAIN MAGGS RASPING TONES CAME FROM THE PORTLAND .
I'M COMING ABOARD FOR AN EXPLANATION OF THIS FOOLERY, MARSH !
STEP ACROSS, CAPTAIN, BY ALL MEANS !

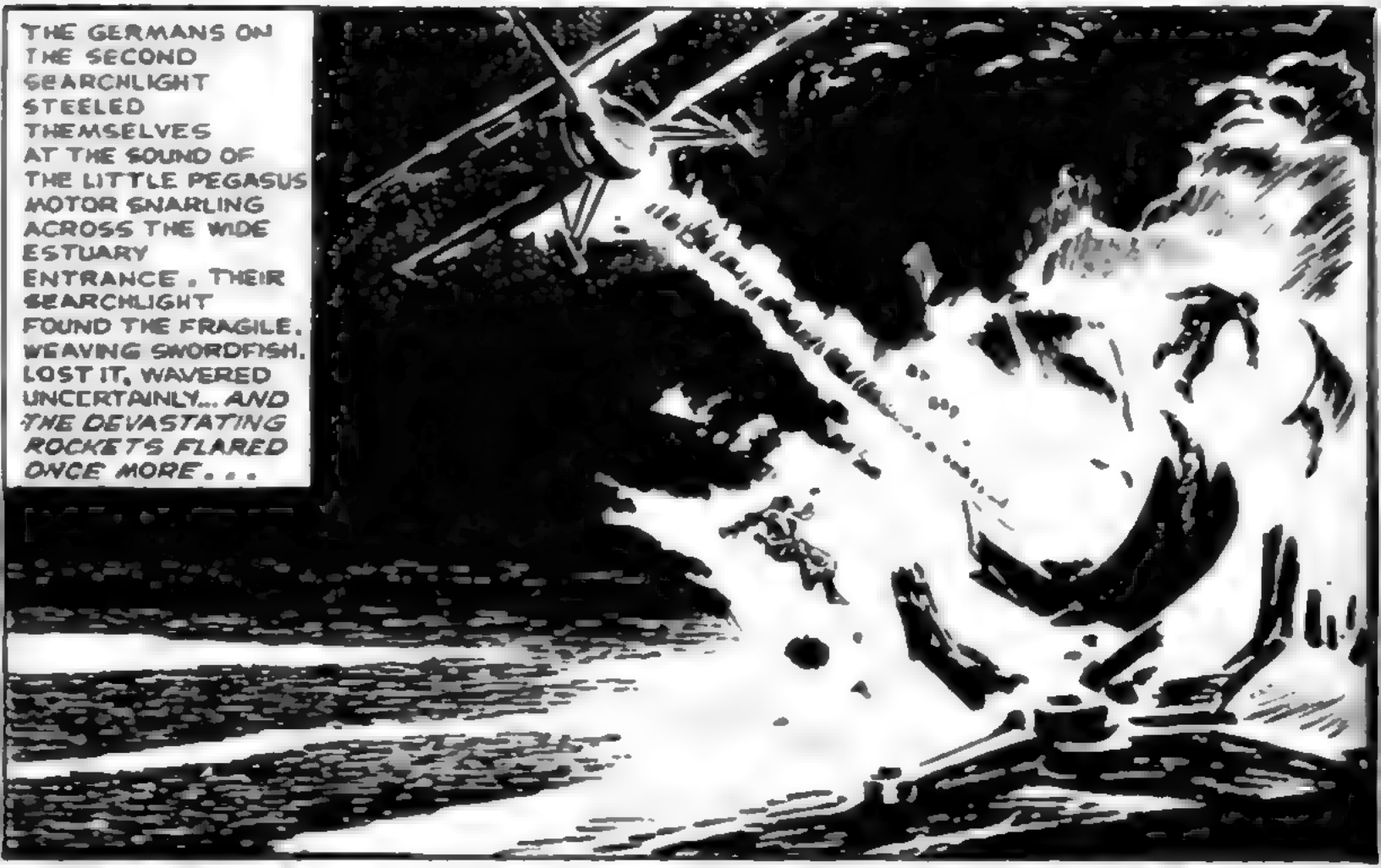
FLUSHED WITH ANGER, CAPTAIN MAGGS STUMPED ABOARD THE MANITOBA AND LISTENED TO FRANK'S PLAN IN MOUNTING AMAZEMENT. IT STUNG FRANK MARSH INTO REOPENING THE OLD DEEP-LYING DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM.
YOU STILL THINK ME A MAD RECKLESS SORT OF COVE, EH, MAGGS?
I'VE EVERY REASON TO - REMEMBERING THAT NIGHT IN TOBRUK HARBOUR!
TOBRUK HAD FALLEN TO ROMMEL. BRITISH TOMMIES CROWDED THE QUAYSIDE WAITING PATIENTLY TO BE TAKEN OFF. SOME WERE LUCKY, OTHERS STILL STOOD THERE AS THE ENEMY DREW VENGEFULLY CLOSE.
I HOLLERED AT YOU, REMEMBER? I TOLD YOU THE HARBOUR WAS MINED. BUT YOU WOULDN'T LISTEN. AND WHAT HAPPENED?
FRANK WOULD NEVER FORGET THAT SHATTERING BLAST UNDER HIS BOWS...COULD FEEL THAT LURCH OF HIS OVERLOADED, STRICKEN SHIP...

MANY LIVES HAD BEEN LOST...VALUABLE LIVES. AS CAPTAIN MAGGS' SCATHING TONES REMINDED HIM. SUDDENLY FRANK TURNED ON THE OTHER...
THERE WERE STILL MEN ON THE QUAYSIDE...I COULDN'T LEAVE THEM THERE.
YOU COULD HAVE HEEDED MY WARNING...


FRANK MARSH TURNED FROM THAT FLUSHED ANGRY FACE, HIS MIND A SUDDEN TURMOIL. WAS THE MAN RIGHT? WAS HE A RECKLESS FOOL?
AND YOU'D BETTER HEED ME NOW. STOP THIS CRAZY IDEA OF GOING UP THE GARRONE, YOU DON'T WANT A REPEAT OF TOBRUK, DO YOU? YOU DON'T WANT TO SINK THESE TWO SHIPS...KILL MORE MEN!


MEANWHILE, TOM WELLS HAD ROARED ACROSS THE WIND-LASHED WATER AND WAS DIVING STRAIGHT DOWN THE BEAM OF THE FIRST SEARCHLIGHT. HE FELT THE THUD OF BULLETS IN THE PLANE'S FABRIC - BUT STILL HE HELD HIS FIRE...

THEN HIS THUMB PUNCHED HOME AND THE SEARCHLIGHT WAS SNUFFED OUT IN THE POWER-PACKED EXPLOSIVE BLAST OF HIS ROCKETS.


THE GERMANS ON THE SECOND SEARCHLIGHT STEELED THEMSELVES AT THE SOUND OF THE LITTLE PEGASUS MOTOR SNARLING ACROSS THE WIDE ESTUARY ENTRANCE. THEIR SEARCHLIGHT FOUND THE FRAGILE, WEAVING SWORDFISH, LOST IT, WAVERED UNCERTAINLY... AND THE DEVASTATING ROCKETS FLARED ONCE MORE...

TOM WELLS SENT HIS SWORDFISH ZOOMING TRIUMPHANTLY AWAY, QUITE UNAWARE THAT A WHEEL HAD BEEN SHOT AWAY FROM HIS UNDERCARRIAGE.
NOW ALL I'VE GOT TO DO IS FIND THE MANITOBA AGAIN!

HE FOUND THE UNWIELDY SHAPE OF THE TWO SHIPS AND CIRCLED FOR HIS LANDING, PEERING ANXIOUSLY FORWARD IN THE DARKNESS. LITTLE DID HE KNOW THAT A FAR DEADLIER HAZARD LOOMED BEFORE HIM...
DOWN, DOWN... HOLD OFF A BIT... NOW DOWN!

SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO SEE THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG. HE BELLOWED A USELESS WARNING AS THE SWORDFISH LURCHED SIDEWAYS AND SKIDDED WILDLY ACROSS THE STEEL DECK ...
A WHEEL'S GONE! HE'S GOING OVER!

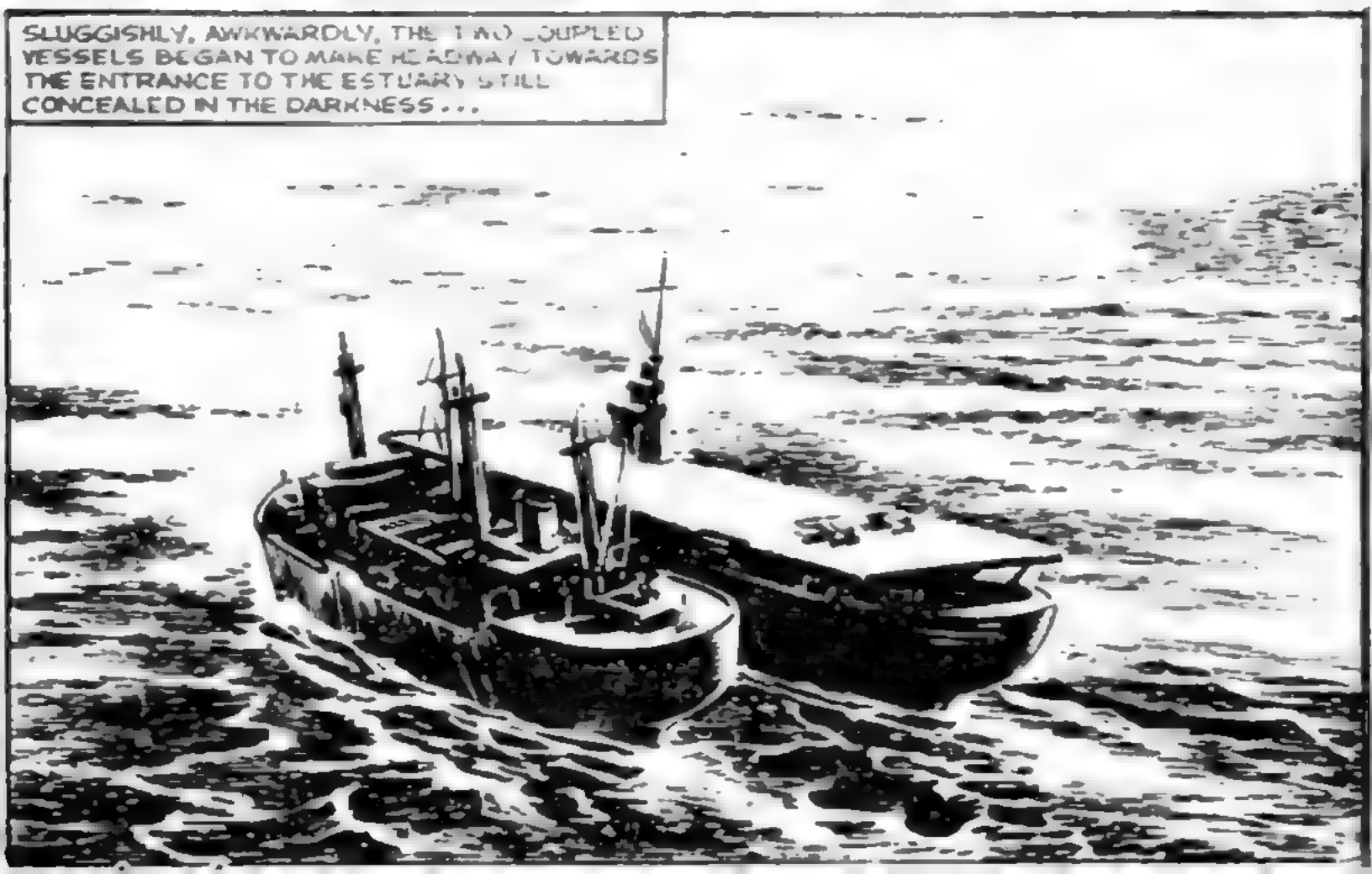
INSTANTLY, DIMMOCK DASHED TO THE EDGE OF THE DECK AND DIVED TO THE RESCUE...

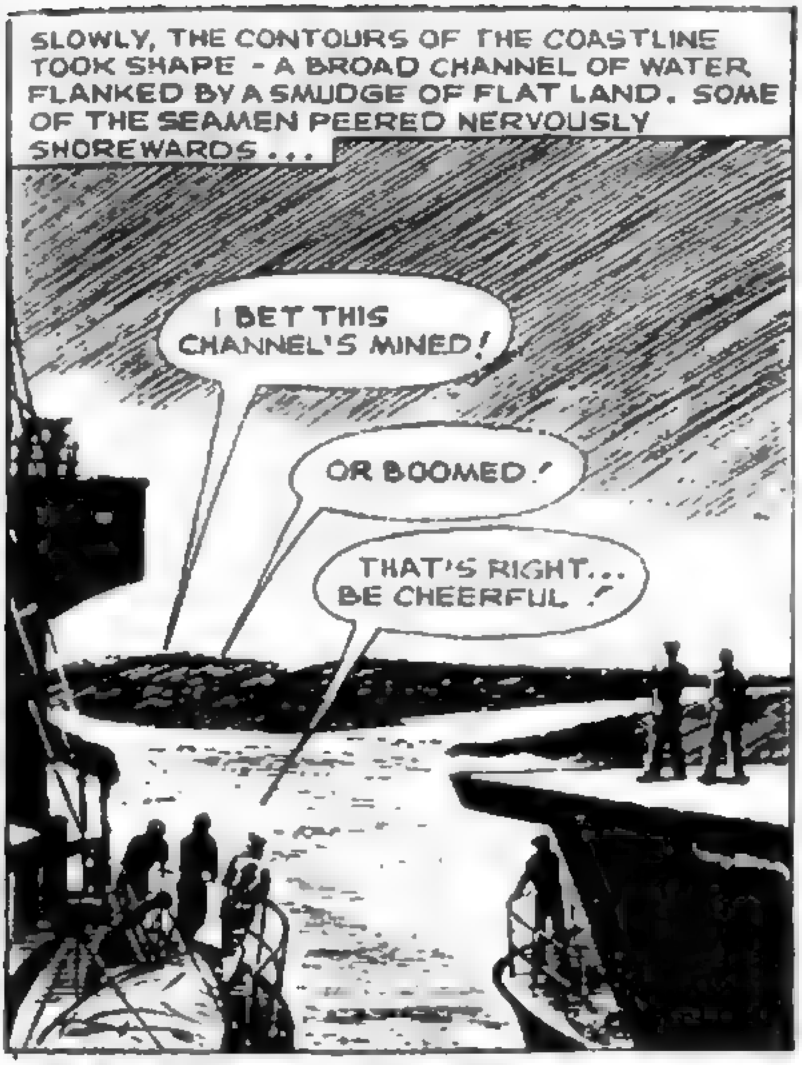
THE PILOT WAS ENTANGLED IN HIS STRAPS BUT THE SOLDIER SLASHED HIM FREE WITH A KNIFE AND PULLED HIM CLEAR EVEN AS THE SWORDFISH SLID BENEATH THE SURFACE
TH-THANKS!
THAT'S ALL RIGHT, MATEY!

FRANK MARSH GREETED THE TWO BEDRAGGLED MEN AS THEY REACHED THE DECK OF THE MANITOBA.
WELL DONE, SERGEANT-MAJOR - A QUICK BIT OF THINKING! YOU SURE YOU'RE ALL RIGHT, WELLS?
I'M OKAY, SIR - AND I GOT THE SEARCHLIGHTS!

A SURGE OF RELIEF WENT THROUGH THE SKIPPER. EVERY LIFE HAD FOR HIM A DOUBLE VALUE, NOW... A DOUBLE IMPORTANCE. THEN HE CAUGHT THE COLDLY SMILING SCORN OF CAPTAIN MAGGS.
SHALL WE TAKE THIS AS... A WARNING, CAPTAIN MARSH?

FRANK TURNED ON CAPTAIN MAGGS, HIS JAW SET LIKE A ROCK. HIS BLAZING EYES FLICKERED OVER THE OTHER'S FACE AS HE SNAPPED CURTLY...
I'LL TROUBLE YOU TO GET BACK TO YOUR SHIP, CAPTAIN MAGGS. WE SHALL ATTEMPT THE GARRONE ESTUARY...AND WE SHALL DO IT NOW!


SLUGGISHLY, AWKWARDLY, THE TWO COUPLED VESSELS BEGAN TO MAKE HEADWAY TOWARDS THE ENTRANCE TO THE ESTUARY STILL CONCEALED IN THE DARKNESS...


SLOWLY, THE CONTOURS OF THE COASTLINE TOOK SHAPE - A BROAD CHANNEL OF WATER FLANKED BY A SMUDGE OF FLAT LAND. SOME OF THE SEAMEN PEERED NERVOUSLY SHOREWARDS . . .
I BET THIS CHANNEL'S MINED!
OR BOOMED!
THAT'S RIGHT... BE CHEERFUL!

THE TENSION ABOARD MOUNTED AS THEY MOVED INSHORE . . .
NO REACTION FROM JERRY!
SOMEBODY MUST HAVE SEEN US!

THEN SUDDENLY STAR SHELLS BURST IN THE SKY LIGHTING THE SEA AND THE TWO SHIPS WITH DAZZLING BRILLIANCE . . .
A GERMAN TUGBOAT!
THAT'S TORN IT!

Chapter 3. GAUNTLET OF FIRE

BUT NOTHING HAPPENED THAT NIGHT. THE TUG STEAMED PAST AND AHEAD OF THEM. BY THE FIRST STREAKS OF DAWN, THEY HAD PENETRATED A HEARTENING THIRTY MILES - NEARLY HALF-WAY. BUT NOT A MAN DARE RELAX. THE ENEMY KNEW THEY WERE THERE — AT ANY MOMENT THEY MUST STRIKE.

FRANK MARSH SHOOK OFF HIS FATIGUE OF HIS NIGHT'S VIGIL AND GLANCED ASTERN TO WHERE HIS PILOTS WERE READYING FOR A DAWN RECCE. THE GALLANT LITTLE AIRCRAFT LOOKED SO SUDDENLY FRAIL, HIS SHIPS SO VULNERABLE...

ONLY TWO AIRCRAFT LEFT... WILL THEY BE ENOUGH WHEN JERRY ATTACKS US?

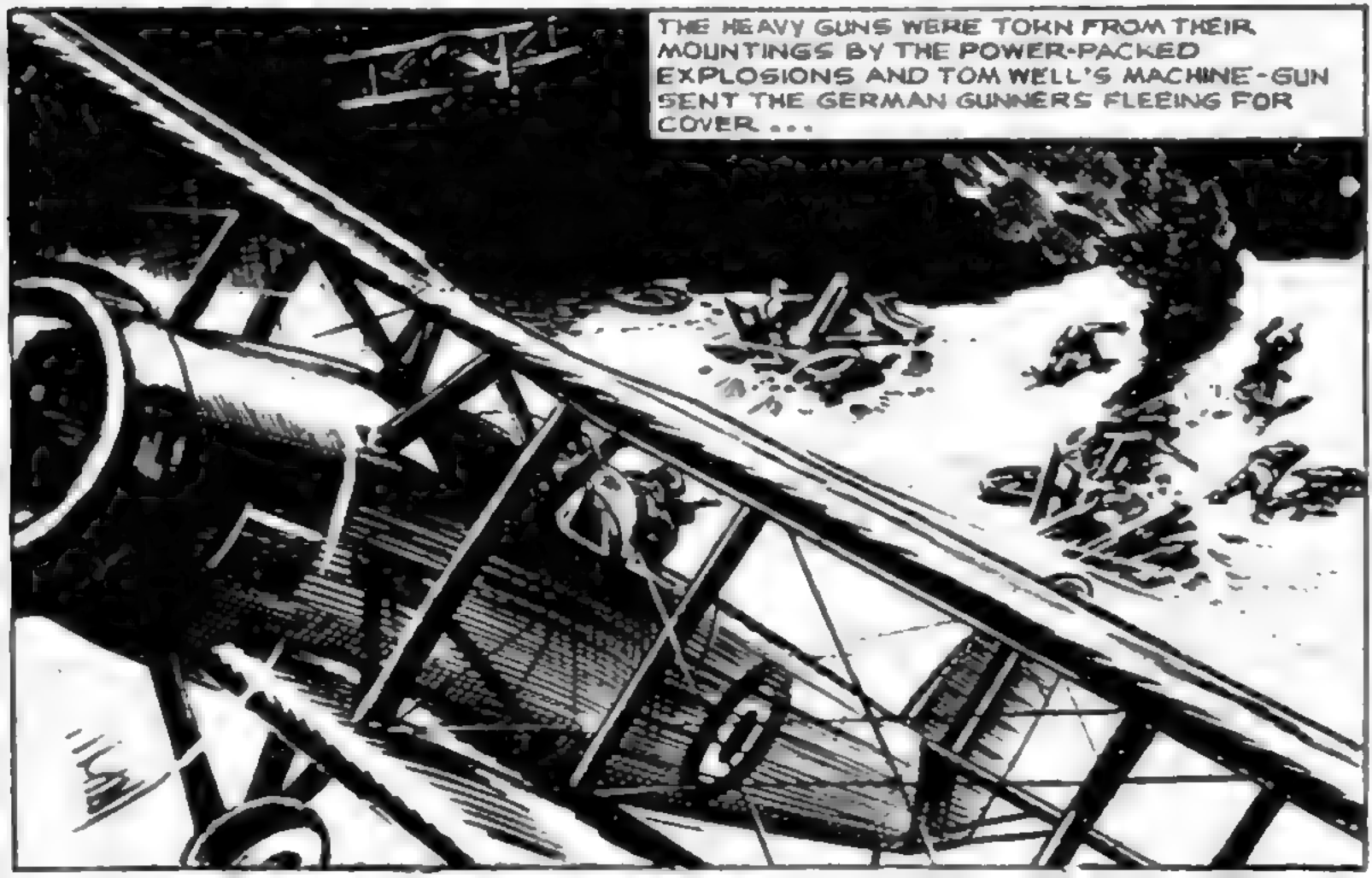
HE FOUND TOM WELLS SETTLED IN CHIPS WOODLEY'S PLANE. DEPRIVED OF HIS OWN AIRCRAFT, THE YOUNGSTER HAD PROMPTLY MADE HIMSELF A GUNNER. THEIR CONFIDENT GRINS RAISED FRANK'S SPIRITS...
TAKE CARE, CHIPS. BOUND TO BE SOME SORT OF AMBUSH... MAYBE A BLOCKADE... AIR ATTACK IS ALMOST CERTAIN!
WE'LL RECCE THE BANKS AHEAD, SIR – AND ATTACK IF NECESSARY. I'LL LET YOU KNOW ON THE RADIO.

CHIPS TOOK OFF AND FLEW UP-RIVER. HE AND TOM SAW LITTLE UNTIL THE EARLY MIST DISPERSED – BUT WHEN IT DID, UNDUE MOVEMENT CAUGHT THEIR ATTENTION ON THE RIGHT-HAND BANK. CHIPS SNAPPED ON THE SWITCH AT HIS LIPS...
HULLO BLUENOSE... HULLO BLUENOSE... TARGET! TARGET!

TARGET ! GUN BATTERY.. TWO MILES UP RIVER !
THE ALARM CRACKLED IN MARSH'S EARS AND AT ONCE HE SIGNALLED THE OTHER SWORDFISH TO TAKE OFF .
RIGHT, CHIPS ! SANDERS IS ALREADY ON HIS WAY TO JOIN YOU !

THE MOMENT BILLY SANDERS CAME UP WITH HIS LEADER, THE PAIR WENT INTO THE ATTACK WITH THEIR ROCKETS . . .

A SECOND SALVO OF ROCKET PROJECTILES COMPLETED THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY BATTERY...
GOING IN... NOW!


THE HEAVY GUNS WERE TORN FROM THEIR MOUNTINGS BY THE POWER-PACKED EXPLOSIONS AND TOM WELL'S MACHINE-GUN SENT THE GERMAN GUNNERS FLEEING FOR COVER...

THE BATTLE TO REACH BORDEAUX HAD BEGUN IN EARNEST. ALREADY FRANK MARSH'S SHIPS WERE BEING HARRIED BY ENEMY E-BOATS.
READY, TORPEDO!
P·20

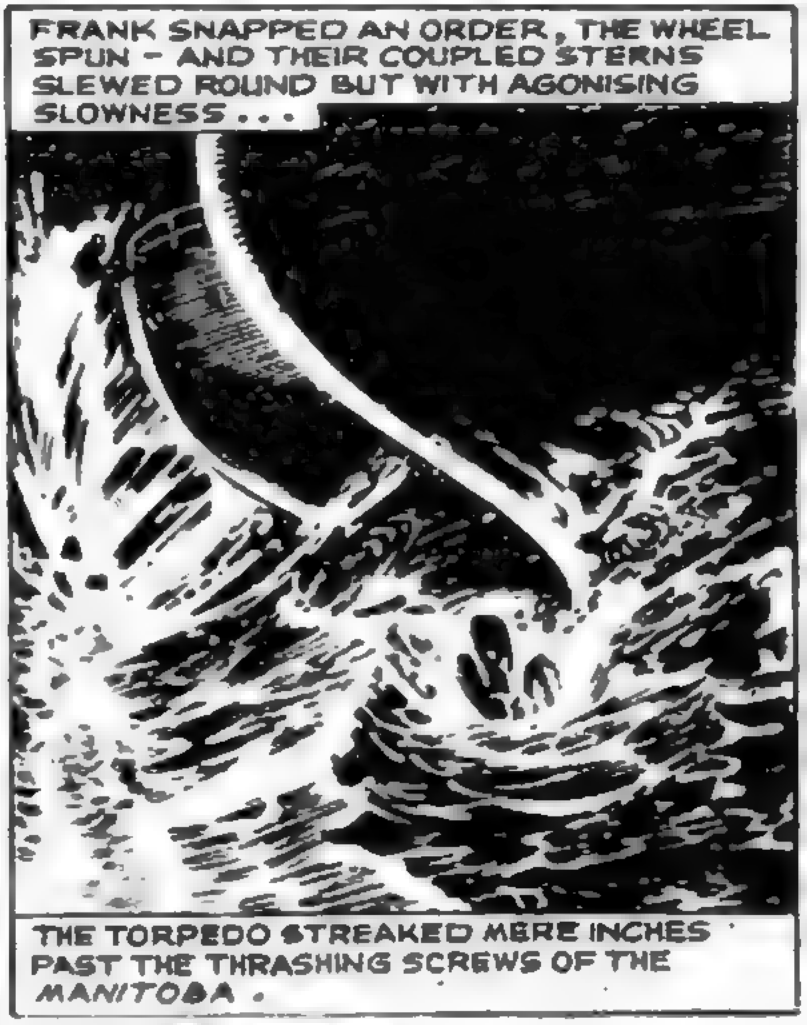
ON HIS BRIDGE ON THE PORTLAND, CAPTAIN MAGGS BRAVED THE ENEMY FIRE WITH [illegible] FEARLESSNESS, MUTTERING ANGRILY TO HIMSELF AT MARSH'S "RECKLESSNESS."
THE BLISTERING FOOL! HE'LL LOSE BOTH THE SHIPS AND EVERY MAN ABOARD THEM WITH HIS CRAZY PLAN!
LOOK OUT, SIR!

BUT HIS CREW WERE FIGHTING BACK AT THEIR SLEEK DEADLY ATTACKERS ...
LEFT, LEFT, JIM - GIVE IT 'IM. NOW. ALL YOU'VE GOT!

ON THE DECK OF THE MANITOBA, SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK WATCHED THE GUN CREW WITH PROFESSIONAL ENVY.
COR, I'D GIVE MY PENSION FOR A SQUINT DOWN THEM SIGHTS!
HE CURSED HIS USELESSNESS. ABOARD SHIP HE FELT OUT OF HIS ELEMENT. THIS WAS NOT A SOLDIER'S BATTLE -- YET!

THEN A YELL OF TRIUMPH SWEPT UP FROM THE GUN CREW. THEY HAD SCORED A DIRECT HIT - EVEN AS A TORPEDO WAS FIRED !
FEUER !
P.20

THE E-BOAT BEGAN TO SINK BY THE STERN - BUT ITS TORPEDO WAS RUNNING - ARROWING SWIFTLY TOWARDS THE MANITOBA'S SIDE.
TORPEDO !


FRANK SNAPPED AN ORDER, THE WHEEL SPUN - AND THEIR COUPLED STERNS SLEWED ROUND BUT WITH AGONISING SLOWNESS . . .
THE TORPEDO STREAKED MERE INCHES PAST THE THRASHING SCREWS OF THE MANITOBA.

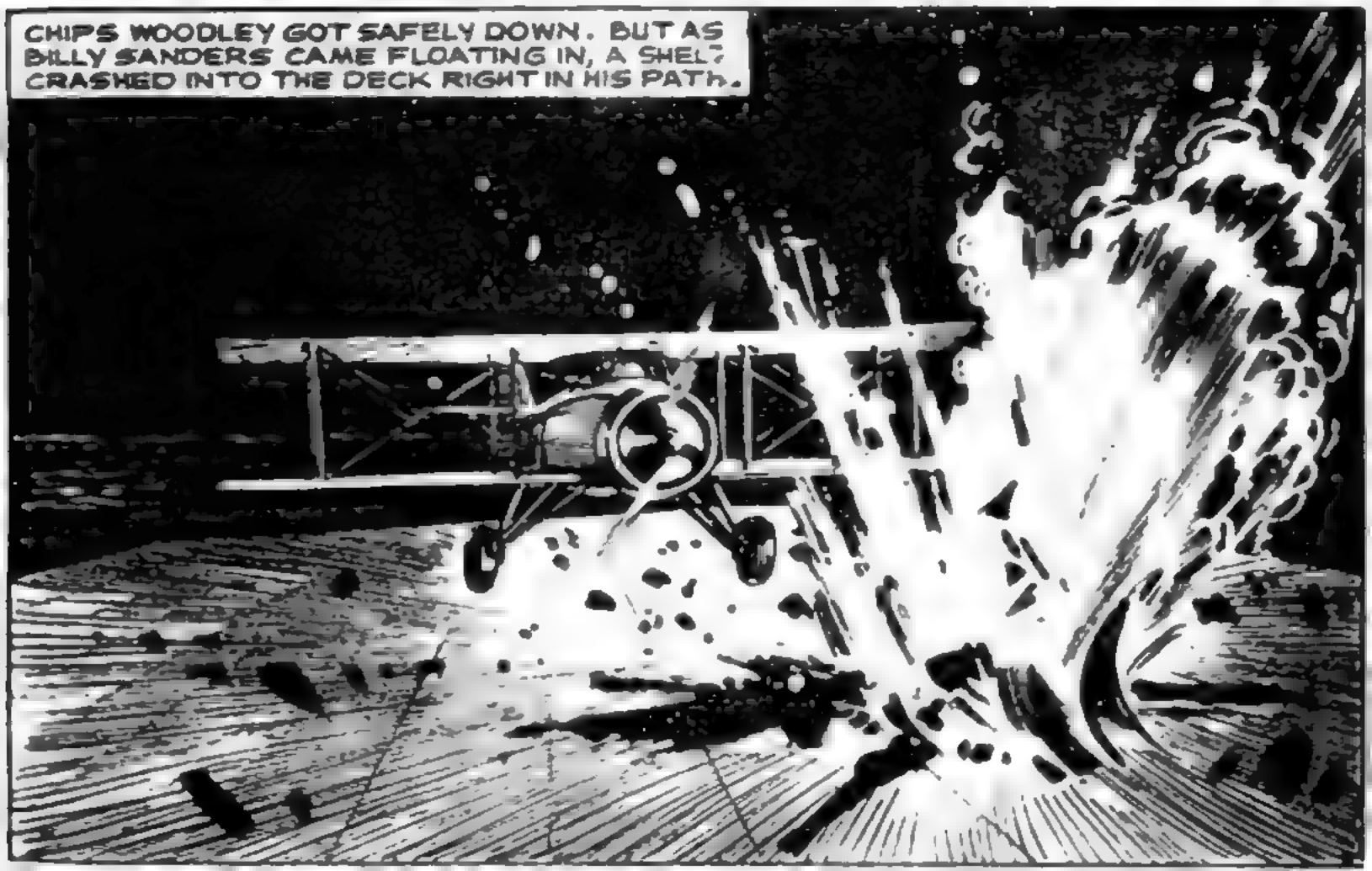
A MOMENT LATER, THE PORTLAND'S SWEATING GUNNERS SCORED A SECOND SUCCESS. AN OERLIKON SHELL PUNCHED INTO THE OTHER E-BOAT'S FUEL TANKS AND THE ENEMY VESSEL WAS ENVELOPED IN A SHEET OF ROARING FLAME!
THAT'S STOPPED THE PERISHER!
NICE SHOOTING, JIM!

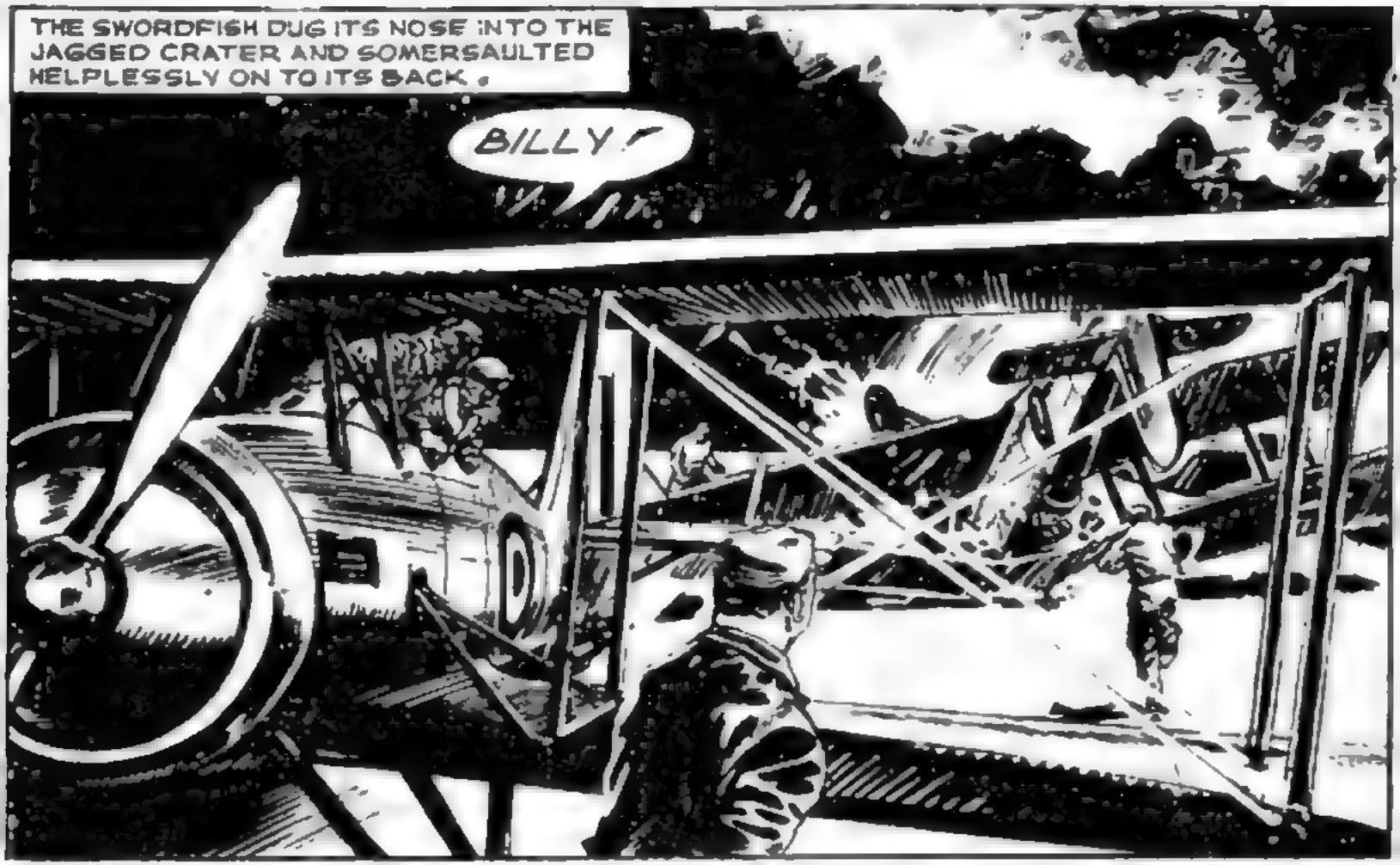
BUT THE CHEERS HAD HARDLY DIED WHEN THERE WAS THE THUMP OF AN EXPLOSION AND A COLUMN OF WATER ERUPTED FROM THE SEA BEFORE THE SHIPS' BOWS.
WE'RE BEING SHELLED!

FRANK MARSH WHIPPED UP HIS GLASSES. THEIR PROBING LENS RAKED ALONG THE RIVER BANK... 500 YARDS... 800... 1500... THEN...
A GERMAN SHIP, SIR... JUST LEAVING MOORINGS!
A MINELAYER. PASS THE WORD TO THE GUNNERS TO ENGAGE HER!
AYE, AYE, SIR!

THE DISCIPLINED NAVAL GUNNERS ON THE ENEMY MINE-LAYER SWIFTLY ADJUSTED THEIR AIM AND THE SECOND SHELL STRUCK THE MANITOBA'S WHEELHOUSE...
TAKE THE WHEEL!
AAAAH!

IN THE MIDST OF THE ROLLING THUNDER AND EXPLOSIVE FURY OF THE GUN-BATTLE, THE SWORDFISH CIRCLED TO LAND ON THE CARRIER...
RE-ARM THOSE PLANES, DOUBLE QUICK!
AYE, AYE, SIR!
FRANK SAW THAT HIS MERCHANT GUNNERS WERE NO MATCH FOR THESE PROFESSIONALS OF THE GERMAN NAVY. ROCKET MISSILES MIGHT BE THE ANSWER.

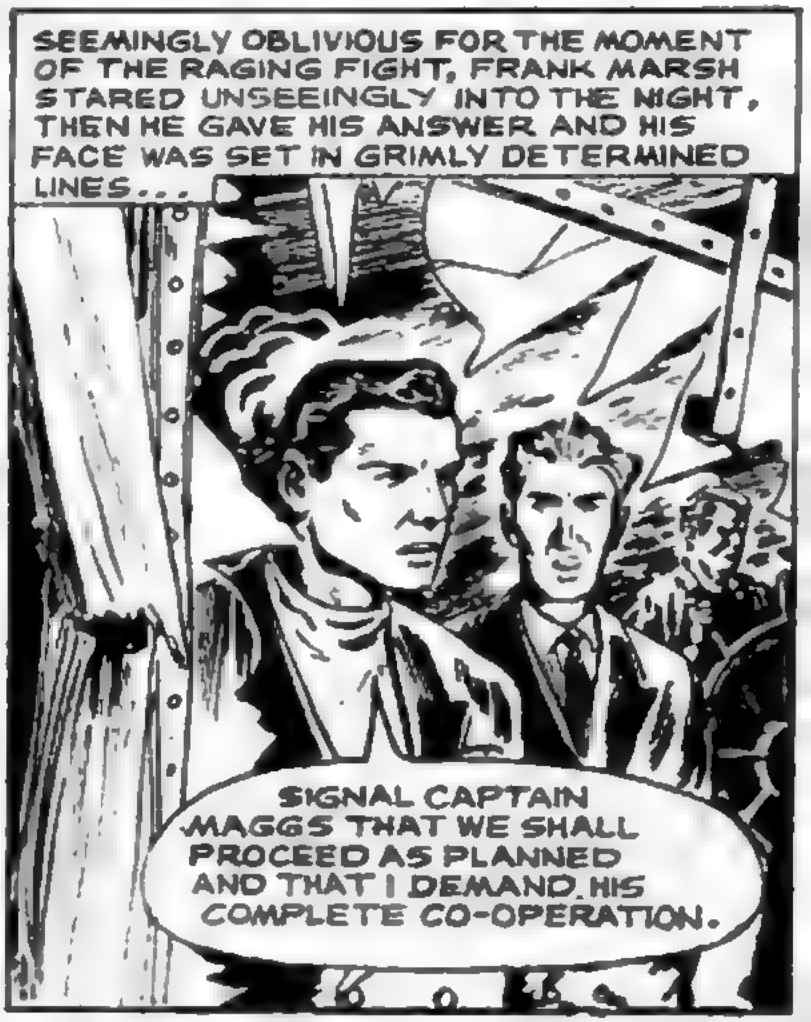

CHIPS WOODLEY GOT SAFELY DOWN. BUT AS BILLY SANDERS CAME FLOATING IN, A SHELL CRASHED INTO THE DECK RIGHT IN HIS PATH.


THE SWORDFISH DUG ITS NOSE INTO THE JAGGED CRATER AND SOMERSAULTED HELPLESSLY ON TO ITS BACK.
BILLY!

ONCE AGAIN IT WAS THE ACTION-HUNGRY DIMMOCK WHO WAS FIRST ON THE SPOT. THRUSTING A HUGE SHOULDER UNDER THE WRECKAGE, HE MANAGED TO PRISE THE CRUSHING WEIGHT A LITTLE FROM THE DAZED SANDERS.
QUICK, SIR - TRY TO EASE YERSELF OUT!

ALL THIS WAS WITNESSED BY THE TIGHT-LIPPED CAPTAIN MAGGS. HE TURNED TO HIS FIRST OFFICER, HIS FACE GREY WITH SUPPRESSED FURY...
LOOK AT THAT...STUPID, USELESS SACRIFICE! THAT MADMAN MARSH WILL HAVE US ALL KILLED! SEND A SIGNAL OVER THERE, JENKINS!
PORT

FIRST OFFICER ANDREWS OF THE MANITOBA BROUGHT CAPTAIN MAGGS' SIGNAL TO HIS SKIPPER...
MESSAGE FROM THE PORTLAND, SIR. CAPTAIN MAGGS DEMANDS WE GIVE UP THE ATTEMPT AND RETIRE UNDER SMOKE SCREEN.


SEEMINGLY OBLIVIOUS FOR THE MOMENT OF THE RAGING FIGHT, FRANK MARSH STARED UNSEEINGLY INTO THE NIGHT, THEN HE GAVE HIS ANSWER AND HIS FACE WAS SET IN GRIMLY DETERMINED LINES...
SIGNAL CAPTAIN MAGGS THAT WE SHALL PROCEED AS PLANNED AND THAT I DEMAND HIS COMPLETE CO-OPERATION.

FROM OUTSIDE THE BRIDGE CAME THE COUGHING ROAR OF THE ONE REMAINING SWORDFISH'S ENGINE. FRANK MARSH SPRANG TO THE SHATTERED WINDOW...
GET THOSE CONFOUNDED GERMAN GUNNERS... AND QUICK!
RIGHT, SIR!

YET ANOTHER SHELL PLUNGED DEEP INTO THE PORTLAND EXPLODING PART OF HER CARGO OF PETROL AND IN A FLASH, THE HOLD WAS AN INFERNO OF LIQUID FLAME.

STILL THE SHELLING WENT ON MERCILESSLY AND THE SEAMEN FOUGHT THE FIRE WITH SHELLS FALLING AROUND THEM.

FRANK MARSH TURNED FOR A BRIEF MOMENT FROM THE DESPERATE SCENE ALONGSIDE TO WATCH CHIPS WOODLEY MAKE HIS ATTACK. *IF HE FAILED — THEY WERE LOST!*

AAARRGH!

BUT WITH DEADLY ACCURACY, THE SWORDFISH LOOSED ITS ROCKETS AT THE GERMAN MINELAYER!

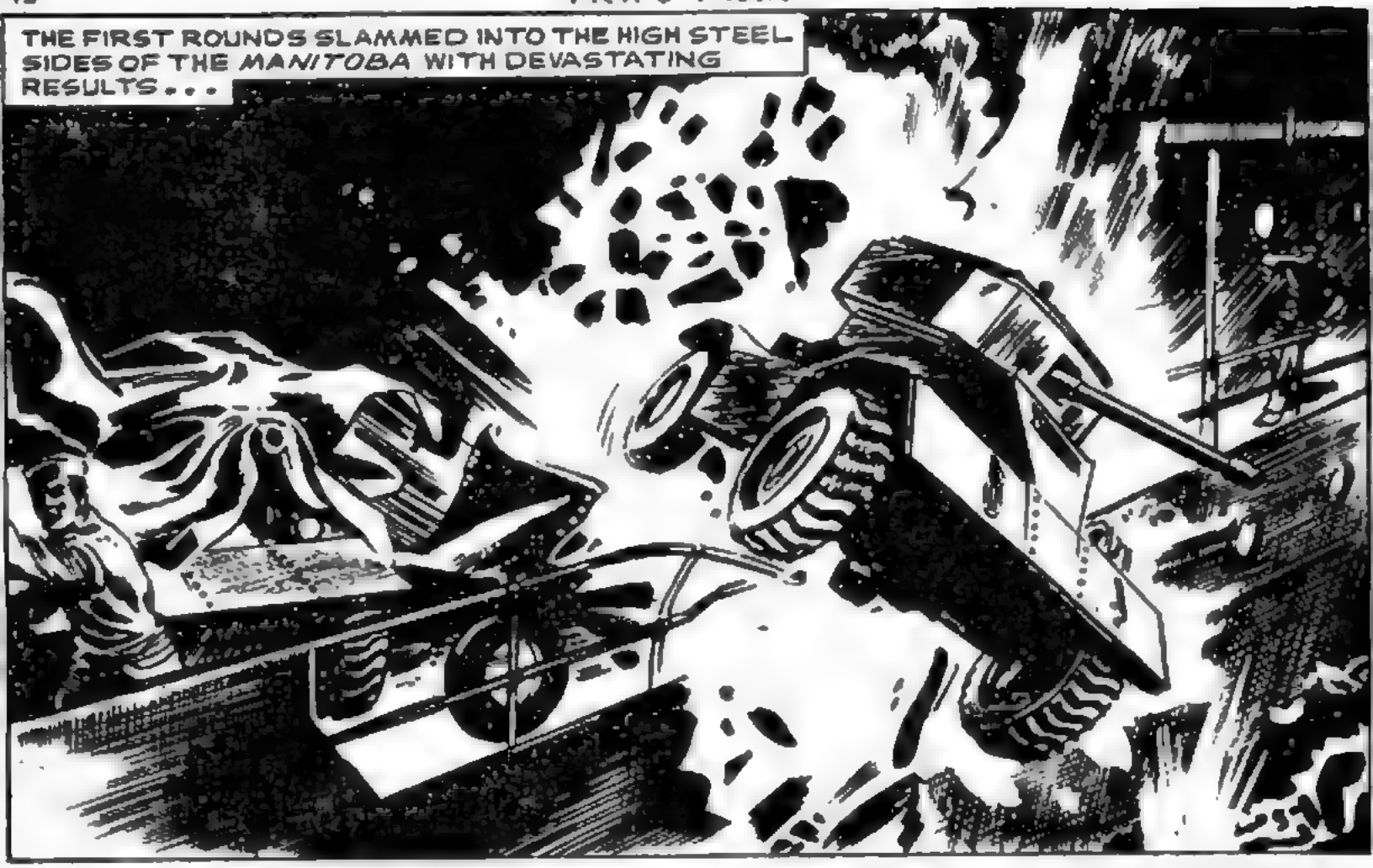
FIRST THE FORWARD GUN AND THEN THE QUICK-FIRING GUN ON THE ENEMY'S STERN WERE SILENCED - THE MINELAYER'S FANGS HAD BEEN DRAWN.
BANG ON, CHIPS!
BUT EVEN WITH THE MINELAYER OUT OF THE BATTLE, THERE WAS NO RESPITE FOR THE BLOCKADE RUNNERS. THE FLICKER OF FLAMES REFLECTED STARKLY FROM THE PORTLAND'S UPPERWORKS AND THE SULLEN ROAR OF THE INTERNAL FIRE REACHED THE YOUNG CAPTAIN'S EARS...
STILL TWENTY-FIVE MILES TO GO, SIR!
AND I'VE A FEELING WE HAVSN'T SEEN THE WORST YET, MISTER ANDREWS. BUT LET IT COME!
MORE THAN EVER, FRANK MARSH FELT GRIPPED BY AN INTENSE URGE TO WIN THROUGH, TO DESTROY MAGGS' CARPING CRITICISM AND MOST OF ALL, TO CARRY THE VITAL AID TO THE GALLANT PEOPLE OF FRANCE.

HIS GRIM SPECULATIONS WERE SOON JUSTIFIED, AS CHIPS AND TOM WELLS WERE TO SEE AS THEY CIRCLED BACK TO THE ESCORT CARRIER . . .

LOOK...JERRY GUNS ! FLAK GUNS FIRING OVER OPEN SIGHTS !

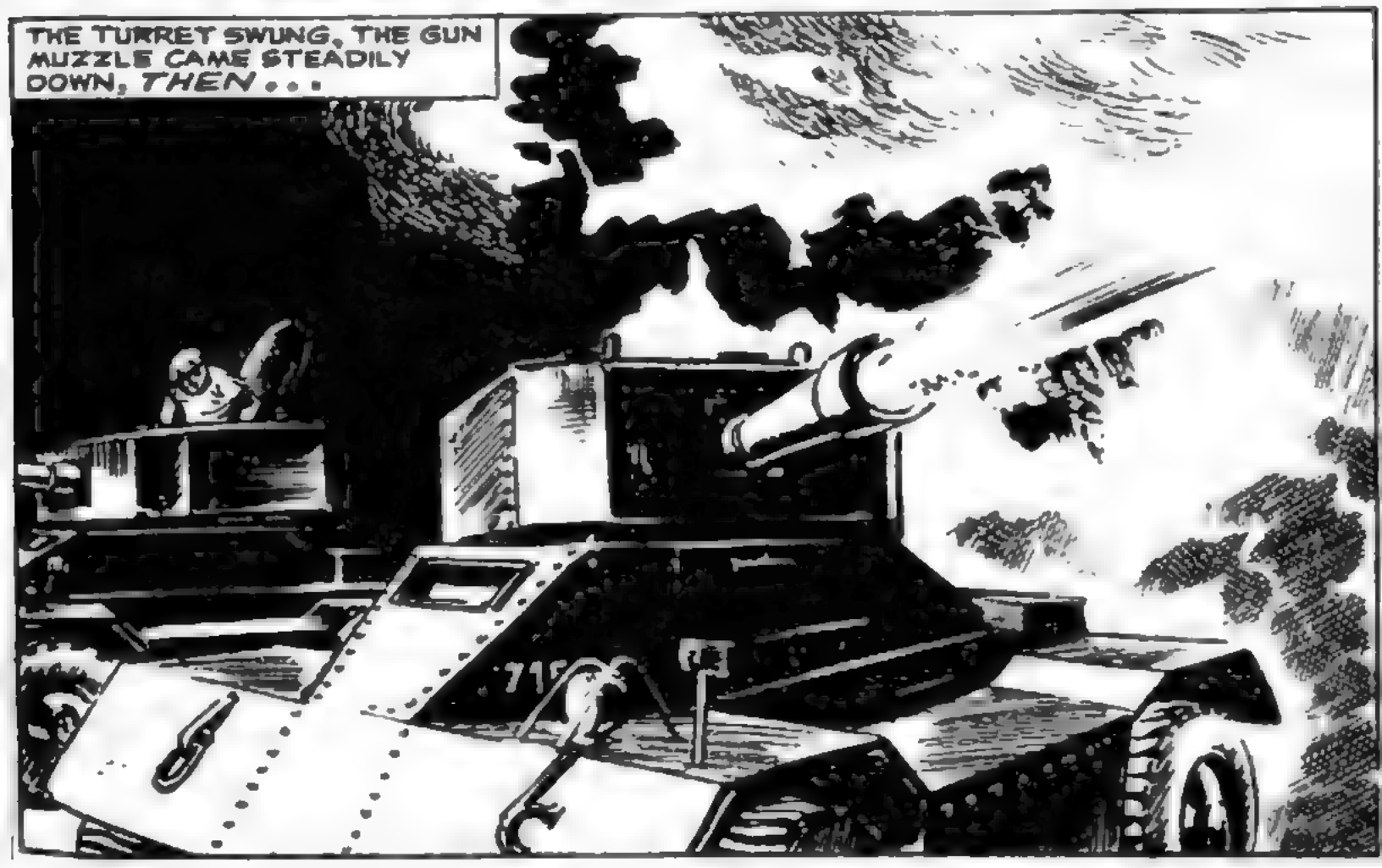
AND NOT A ROCKET LEFT ! LET'S GET DOWN PRONTO !

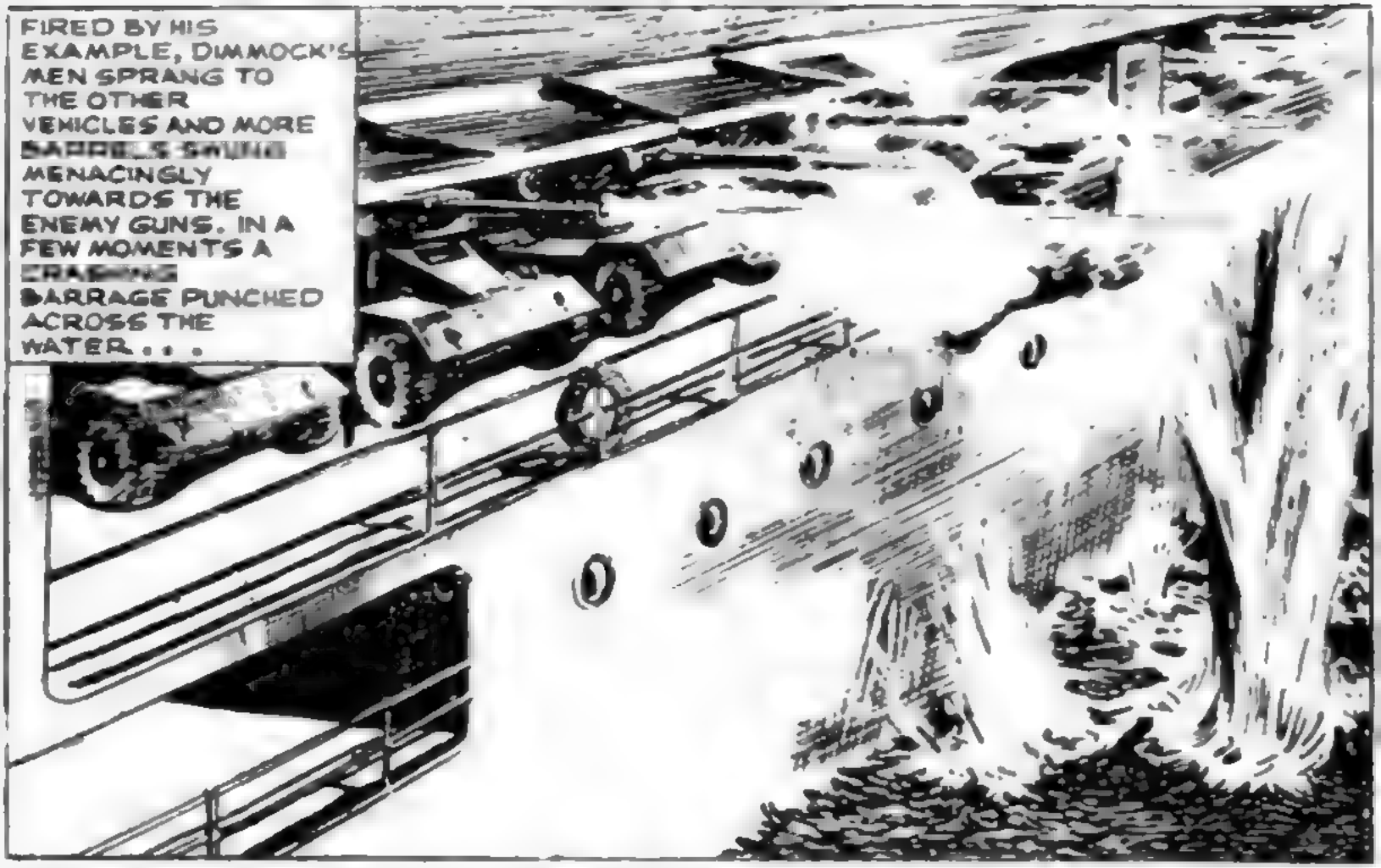
IT WAS A BATTERY OF GERMAN 88mm ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS SITED TO GUARD THE APPROACHES TO THE CITY AND NOW BROUGHT INTO ACTION AGAINST A TOTALLY UNEXPECTED TARGET . . .


THE FIRST ROUNDS SLAMMED INTO THE HIGH STEEL SIDES OF THE *MANITOBA* WITH DEVASTATING RESULTS . . .

AND SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK WATCHED THE DESTRUCTION OF HIS GLEAMING NEW ARMOURED VEHICLES WITH MOUNTING FURY. SUDDENLY, HE STARTED FORWARD, HIS EYES LIT WITH THE URGE TO HIT BACK . . .
BY CRIPPEN, THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GET AWAY WITH THIS!

ROARING FOR HIS MEN, DIMMOCK FLUNG THE TARPAULIN OFF AN ARMOURED CAR AND IN SECONDS WAS CLAMBERING INSIDE ...
I'LL SHOW THOSE PERISHING JERRIES!


THE TURRET SWUNG, THE GUN MUZZLE CAME STEADILY DOWN, THEN...


FIRED BY HIS EXAMPLE, DIMMOCK'S MEN SPRANG TO THE OTHER VEHICLES AND MORE GUNS SWUNG MENACINGLY TOWARDS THE ENEMY GUNS. IN A FEW MOMENTS A CRASHING BARRAGE PUNCHED ACROSS THE WATER. . .

THE SIX-POUNDER FIRE CLIMBED THE DUNES AND CRASHED HOME ON ITS TARGET WITH DESTRUCTIVE ACCURACY.
DONNER UND BLITZEN! SHE IS ALL GUNS, THIS SHIP!

THE RAGGED BUT DEADLY BROADSIDE DREW THE STARTLED APPROVAL OF FRANK MARSH AND HIS CREW.
THAT MUST BE SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK'S IDEA. JUST WHAT WE NEED.'
HARK AT THOSE ARMY BOYS HAVING A GO.'

TWO OF THE ENEMY GUNS WERE KNOCKED OUT AND EVEN AS THE MANITOBA'S ARMAMENT CONCENTRATED ON THE THIRD, A MORE DANGEROUS THREAT DARKENED THE SKY...
FOLLOW ME INTO THE ATTACK, EAGLE TWO' YOU TAKE THE CARGO SHIP, I'LL TAKE THE CARRIER'

THE NOISE OF THE GUN BATTLE HAD DROWNED THE AIRCRAFTS' APPROACH AND, COMPLETELY UNOPPOSED, THE LEADING GERMAN PILOT COOLLY BEGAN HIS BOMBING RUN OVER THE MANITOBA. THE BOMB DOORS SLOWLY GAPED OPEN...
FAREWELL, ENGLANDER.
THE BOMBS WERE ALREADY PLUMMETING DOWNWARDS WHEN THE WARNING WAS GIVEN. CHIPS WOODLEY IMMEDIATELY TOOK OFF IN THE SOLE SURVIVING SWORDFISH...
ENEMY AIRCRAFT ATTACKING!

ONLY ONE BOMB OF THE STICK STRUCK HOME ON THE CARRIER BUT UNFORTUNATELY A FLYING SPLINTER OF STEEL CAUGHT FRANK MARSH ON THE HEAD AND KNOCKED HIM UNCONSCIOUS.
UGH!
WHAT'S HAPPENED HERE? I TOLD MARSH HE WOULD HAVE US ALL KILLED! IS HE...
NO SIR — HE'S ALIVE!
FIRST OFFICER ANDREWS DROPPED TO HIS KNEE BESIDE HIS FALLEN CAPTAIN AND A MOMENT LATER, LOOKED UP TO SEE CAPTAIN MAGGS STUMPING ON TO THE MANITOBA'S BRIDGE ...

INSTANTLY, THE OLDER MAN SEIZED HIS OPPORTUNITY...
I SEE - THEN GET HIM BELOW. AND PASS THE WORD - CAPTAIN MAGGS IS NOW IN COMMAND!

MAGGS THRUST HIS FACE NEAR THE VOICE PIPE AND SPOKE WITH HARSH AUTHORITY...
ENGINE ROOM... WE'RE TURNING ABOUT! SLOW ASTERN PORT... SLOW AHEAD STARBOARD...

BUT HIS NEXT ORDER CHOKED IN HIS THROAT AS A HAND SHOVED HIM UNCEREMONIOUSLY ASIDE. FRANK MARSH, HALF-BLINDED BY PAIN BUT STILL SAVAGELY DETERMINED, HAD COME TO HIS SENSES...
AS YOU WERE ENGINE ROOM - STAY ON COURSE! STAY ON COURSE, D'YOU HEAR ME!
WHA... WHA...

EYES BLAZING, THE TWO MEN FACED EACH OTHER ...
IF WE EVER GET OUT OF THIS ALIVE I'LL ...
I'M NOT THINKING OF OUR LIVES, CAPTAIN MAGGS ... I'M THINKING OF THOSE POOR DEVILS DYING IN THE STREETS OF BORDEAUX ... FOR WANT OF THE WEAPONS ... WHICH WE CAN GIVE THEM!

SUDDENLY A DEAFENING EXPLOSION SPUN THEM ROUND. THE SECOND ENEMY PLANE HAD MADE ITS ATTACK AND A GREAT GEYSER OF WATER ROSE FROM BESIDE THE PORTLAND.

A JAGGED HOLE WAS TORN IN THE PORTLAND'S STEEL SIDE, RIGHT ON THE WATERLINE. INSTANTLY THERE WAS CHAOS...
LOOK OUT!
HELP!

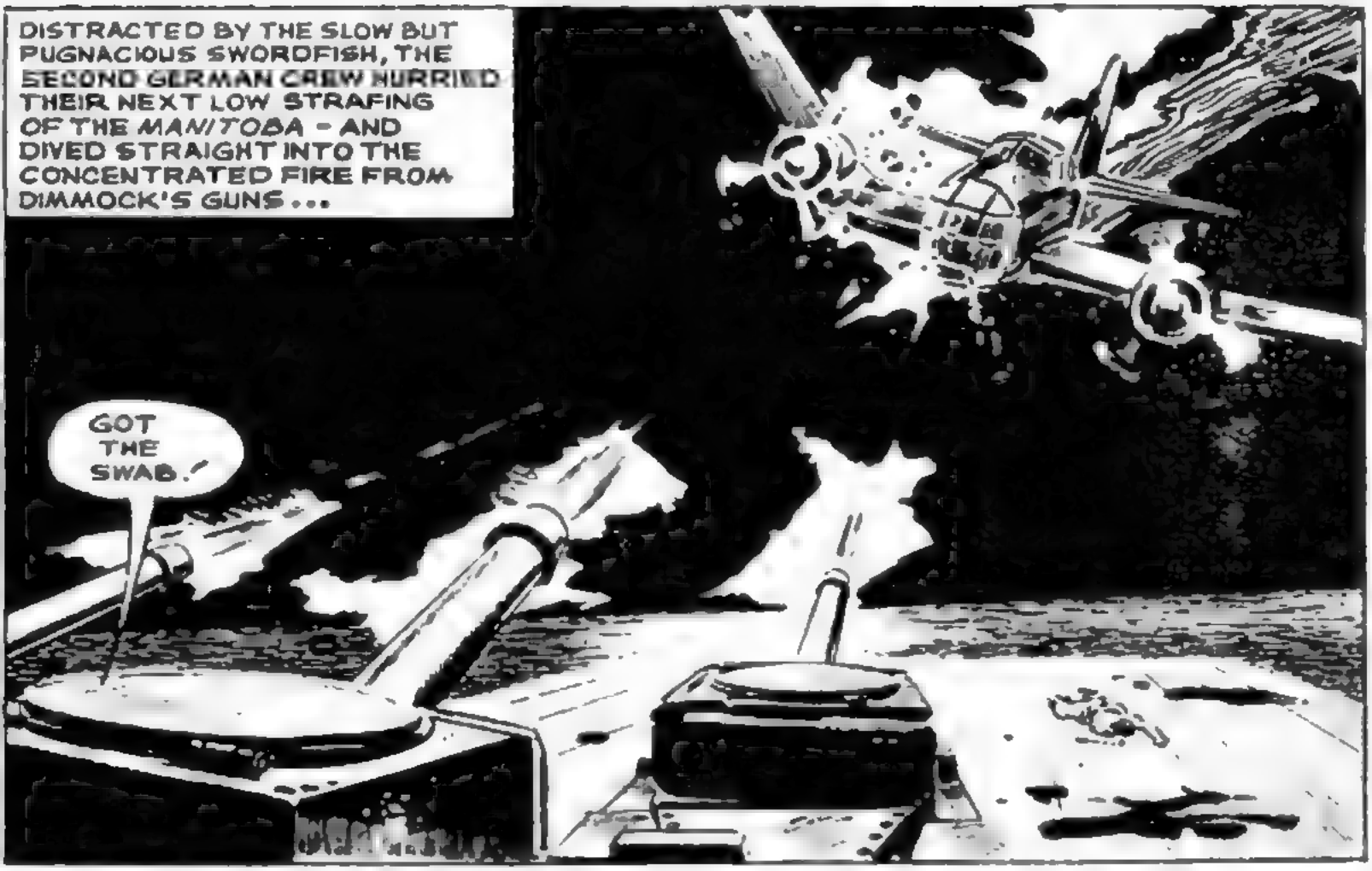
WITH BOTH FIRE AND HUNGRY WATERS RAVAGING HER HOLDS, THE CARGO SHIP BEGAN TO SETTLE. FRANK MARSH'S ORDERS WERE SWIFT AND DECISIVE...
ATTENTION! WE SHALL ABANDON THE PORTLAND. TRANSFER ALL YOU CAN... ARMS... STORES... VEHICLES. GET THOSE DERRICKS WORKING! JUMP TO IT!

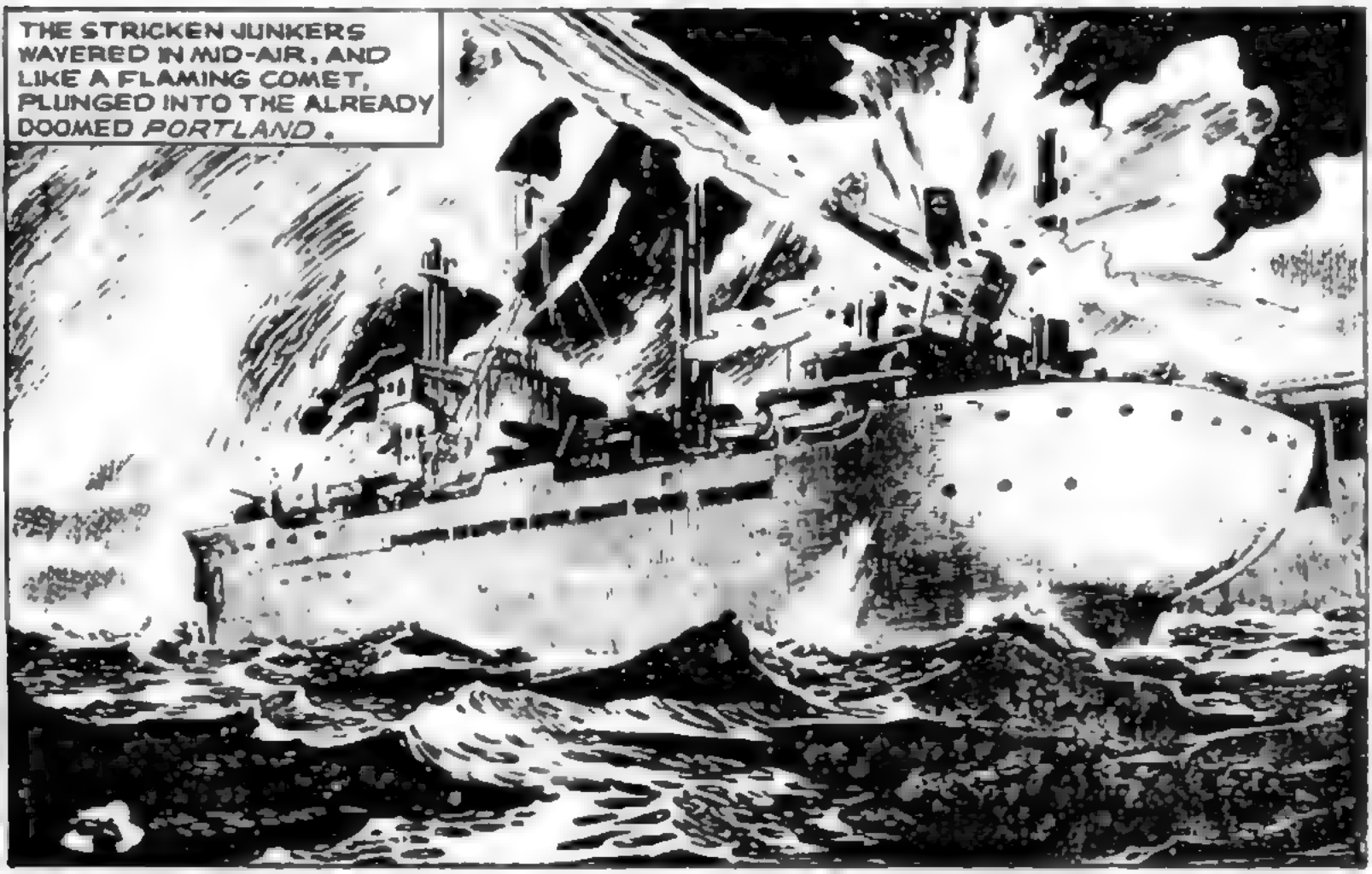
Chapter 4 THE LAST LAP

FLUSHED WITH TRIUMPH FROM HIS DUEL WITH THE ENEMY GUNS, SERGEANT-MAJOR DIMMOCK CLIMBED TO THE FLIGHT DECK WHERE A FEW OF THE PORTLAND'S CARGO OF ARMOURED CARS WERE STANDING...
COME ON, LADS - MAN THE GUNS! WE'LL SHOW THOSE PERISHIN' JERRIES IF THEY COME BACK!

UUUUUGH!
AND WHEN THE GERMANS SWEPT IN AGAIN TO ATTACK THE SEEMINGLY DEFENCELESS CARRIER, A TORNADO OF STEEL RIPPED INTO THEM...

WITH ITS PILOT'S LIFELESS HANDS SLIPPING FROM THE CONTROLS, THE FIRST AIRCRAFT PLUNGED INTO THE SEA. MEANWHILE, CHIPS WOODLEY'S SWORDFISH WAS CLIMBING OFF THE DECK AND WAS HARASSING THE OTHER JUNKERS.


DISTRACTED BY THE SLOW BUT PUGNACIOUS SWORDFISH, THE SECOND GERMAN CREW HURRIED THEIR NEXT LOW STRAFING OF THE *MANITOBA* - AND DIVED STRAIGHT INTO THE CONCENTRATED FIRE FROM DIMMOCK'S GUNS ...
GOT THE SWAB.'


THE STRICKEN JUNKERS WAVERED IN MID-AIR, AND LIKE A FLAMING COMET, PLUNGED INTO THE ALREADY DOOMED *PORTLAND*.

FRANK MARSH SAW THE CARGO SHIP REEL FROM THE MIGHTY IMPACT AND KNEW THAT ANY SECOND SHE MIGHT BLOW UP AND TAKE THEM ALL WITH HER ...

CUT THE PORTLAND LOOSE! ABANDON SHIP, CAPTAIN MAGGS!

THE *PORTLAND* WAS ALREADY ABANDONED BELOW DECKS AND IT TOOK ONLY SECONDS FOR THE REMAINING CREW TO LEAP ACROSS TO THE CARRIER ...

JUST IN TIME - THERE SHE GOES!

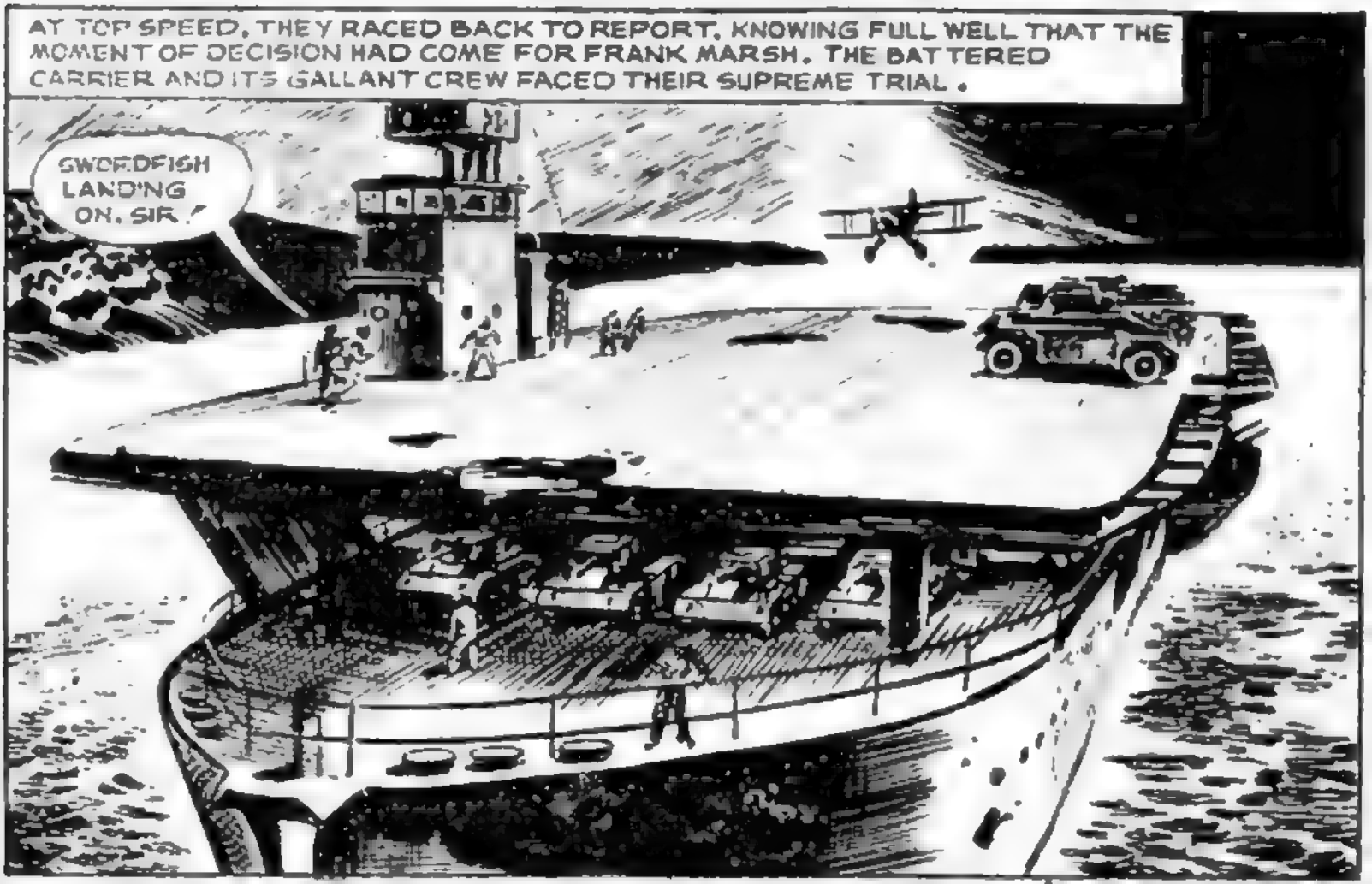
THE FIRES ABOARD THE *PORTLAND* WERE QUENCHED FOR EVER BENEATH THE WAVES — AND THEY WERE STILL FIVE MILES FROM THEIR OBJECTIVE.

SIGNAL THE SWORDFISH ... MAKE FOR BORDEAUX ... REPORT ANY FURTHER AMBUSH ... AND FIND OUT IF THE FRENCH STILL HOLD THE DOCKS.

FRANK TURNED, A LITTLE DEFIANTLY, TO FACE CAPTAIN MAGGS AND WAS TAKEN ABACK AT THE OTHER'S UNEXPECTED CHANGE OF TONE. IT WAS STILL HARSH BUT THERE WAS A HINT OF GRUDGING RESPECT...
YOU'RE RUINING US ALL, CAPTAIN MARSH, AS I SO PLAINLY WARNED YOU. BUT I KNOW COURAGE WHEN I SEE IT.
AN AWKWARD SILENCE FOLLOWED THIS STRANGELY MOVING SPEECH. THEN THE OLD SEA CAPTAIN TOOK HIMSELF WEARILY BELOW.

ACTING ON CAPTAIN MARSH'S SIGNALS, CHIPS WOODLEY TOOK THE SWORDFISH OVER THE DOCKS OF BORDEAUX. THE WHOLE AREA WAS DEVASTATED AND THROUGH THE SMOKE OF BATTLE HE COULD SEE THE BARRICADES AND THE FLASH OF RIFLE FIRE...
LOOKS AS IF THEY'RE HAVING A TOUGH TIME, SKIPPER!
THE FRENCH ARE STILL HOLDING THE DOCKS! THEY'VE SEEN US - THEY KNOW WE'RE COMING!

CHIPS SWUNG THE SWORDFISH BACK DOWN RIVER, FLYING LOW ABOVE THE BANK ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE TOWN.
GOOD GRIEF, LOOK - GUNS, TANKS - THE LOT!
ENOUGH TO BLOW THE MANITOBA OUT OF THE WATER!


AT TOP SPEED, THEY RACED BACK TO REPORT, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THE MOMENT OF DECISION HAD COME FOR FRANK MARSH. THE BATTERED CARRIER AND ITS GALLANT CREW FACED THEIR SUPREME TRIAL.
SWORDFISH LAND'NG ON, SIR!

FRANK LISTENED UNFLINCHINGLY TO WOODLEY'S URGENT WARNING. THEN HE TURNED TO HIS MEN AND THE COURAGE AND RESOLUTION IN HIS VOICE FIRED THEM WITH FIERCE WILL TO FIGHT ON, COME WHAT MAY.
LISTEN, LADS! THE FRENCH IN BORDEAUX HAVE FOUGHT LIKE HEROES AND THEY'LL BE WIPED OUT WITHOUT MERCY UNLESS WE TAKE THESE ARMS IN TO THEM. WHAT DO WE DO? DO WE RAT ON 'EM NOW – OR DO WE GO IN EVERY GUN FIRING?
WE GO IN, SKIPPER!
THE OLD MANITOBA ISN'T BEATEN YET!

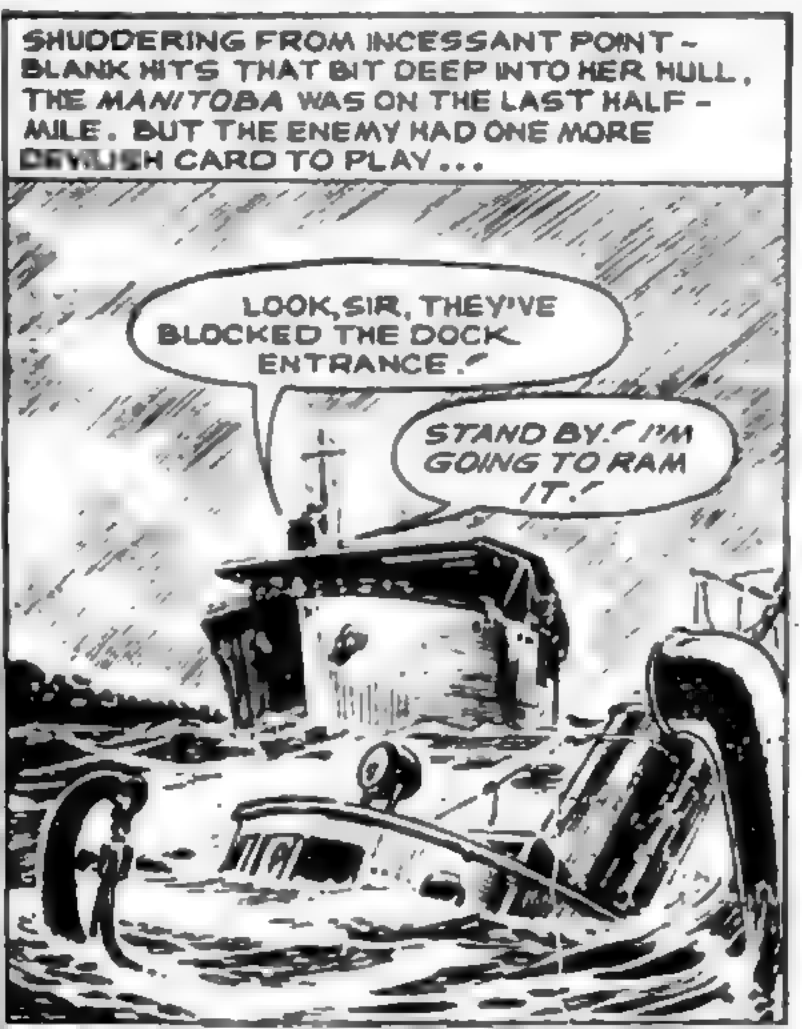
WITH HER SHELL-SCARRED SIDES QUIVERING AS THE ENGINES STRAINED TO DRIVE HER ALONG AT MAXIMUM REVOLUTIONS, THE PROUD SHIP BORE DOWN ON HER WAITING ENEMIES.
ACHTUNG! SHE COMES!

WITHOUT FALTERING, THE MANITOBA SAILED IN TO HER DESTINY - TO THE RUNNING GAUNTLET OF SHOT AND SHELL FROM ENEMY GUNS THAT STROVE TO BLAST HER OUT OF THE WATER.
AAAGH!

EVERY ARMOURED CAR WAS MANNED AND SERGEANT MAJOR DIMMOCK YELLED ORDERS AND ENCOURAGEMENT AT THE MAKE-SHIFT GUNNERS .
YOU'RE AT WAR, LADS ! GIVE IT 'EM HOT AND STRONG !

AND THE GUNS OF THE ARMOURED CARS ON BOTH DECKS LOOSED A TERRIBLE CANNONADE AT THE GERMANS .

THE MANITOBA WAS GETTING A FEARFUL MAULING BUT SHE WAS GIVING BACK AS GOOD AS SHE RECEIVED...


SHUDDERING FROM INCESSANT POINT-BLANK HITS THAT BIT DEEP INTO HER HULL, THE MANITOBA WAS ON THE LAST HALF-MILE. BUT THE ENEMY HAD ONE MORE DEVILISH CARD TO PLAY...
LOOK, SIR, THEY'VE BLOCKED THE DOCK ENTRANCE.
STAND BY. I'M GOING TO RAM IT.

THE MASSIVE BOWS OF THE CARRIER CRUNCHED INTO THE BARRICADE OF SUNKEN SHIPS, BATTERING STEEL SUPERSTRUCTURE AND DECKING INTO SO MUCH SCRAP METAL AND SPLINTERED WRECKAGE.

THE SHIP HEAVED CONVULSIVELY INTO THE WALL OF BLOCKSHIPS AND FOR A MOMENT SHE WAS ALMOST MOTIONLESS. CAPTAIN MAGGS CAME POUNDING UP TO THE BRIDGE...
SHE WON'T DO IT, MARSH! SHE'S STOVE IN AT THE BOWS! SHE'S FILLING!
WE MUST GET THERE! WE MUST!
THEN, MIRACULOUSLY, INCREDIBLY, THE MANITOBA MOVED ON. THOUGH HER FORWARD HOLD WAS FILLING SHE WAS STILL NAVIGABLE. FOOT BY FOOT, HER CAPTAIN COAXED HER TOWARDS THE QUAYSIDE WHERE BATTLE-GRIMED FIGURES WAVED IN FRENZIED WELCOME...
SLOW ASTERN, BOTH!
VIVE, L'ANGLETERE!
TO THE SHIP, MY FRIENDS!
BRAVO!

A FEW MOMENTS LATER, THE MANITOBA CAME TO REST - CRIPPLED BUT TRIUMPHANT ! THE SEAMEN SWARMED ASHORE. TO MAN THE DOCKSIDE CRANES AND GET THE VITAL CARGO ASHORE .
SERGEANT MAJOR DIMMOCK AND HIS MEN WATCHED WITH ENVIOUS GRINS AS THE DELIGHTED FRENCH TOOK POSSESSION OF THE ARMOURED VEHICLES ...
OUR HEART IS FULL ! WE THANK YOU !
THAT'S ALL RIGHT, MATE !
NOW, LET'S SEE YOU BASH THEM JERRIES !

PRESENTLY, CHEERED BY THE BRITISH, THE POWERFUL ARMOURED CARS WERE STREAMING ACROSS THE SQUARE INTO BATTLE, TO REINFORCE THE BARRICADES AND DRIVE A WEDGE OF STEEL INTO THE GERMAN LINES.
EN AVANT! VICTOIRE!
ZP 251

AS FRANK MARSH LOOKED AROUND HIS SPENT AND BROKEN SHIP, HE FELT A SYMPATHETIC TOUCH ON HIS SLEEVE. IT WAS THE FRENCH HARBOURMASTER.
MOURN NOT FOR YOUR BRAVE SHIP, MY FRIEND. SHE SHALL BE RAISED FROM THE DEEP WATERS... EVEN AS SHE HAS RAISED THE FLAG OF FRANCE IN BORDEAUX. VIVE, LA MANITOBA!

THE ROLLING THUNDER OF THE GUNS, THE BATTLE CRIES OF THE INVIGORATED FRENCHMEN TOLD FRANK MARSH THAT HE HAD BEEN RIGHT IN HIS JUDGMENT AND HIS DECISION. HE TURNED AND CAPTAIN MAGGS GRIPPED HIS HAND HEARTILY AND WITHOUT RESERVATION.

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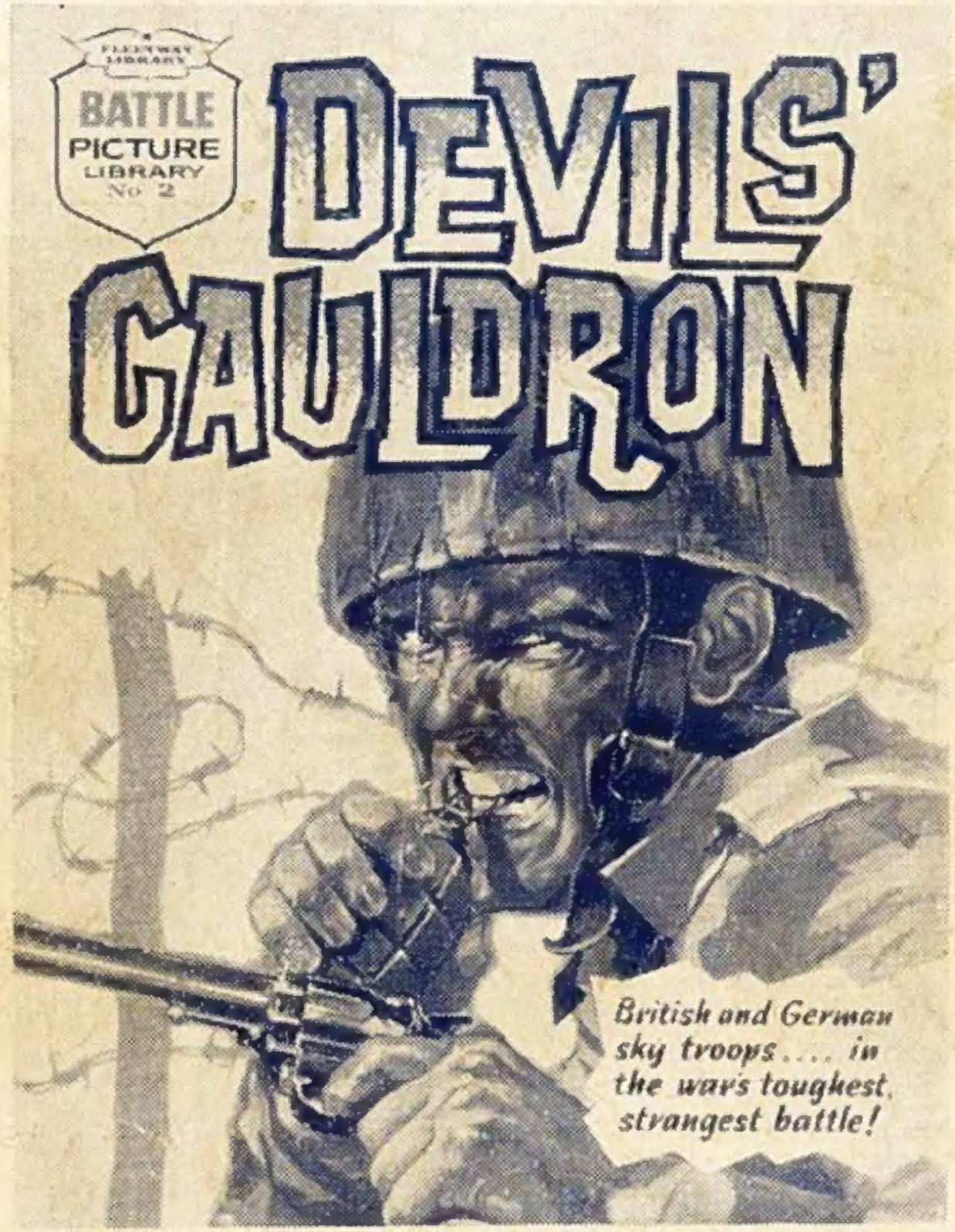

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